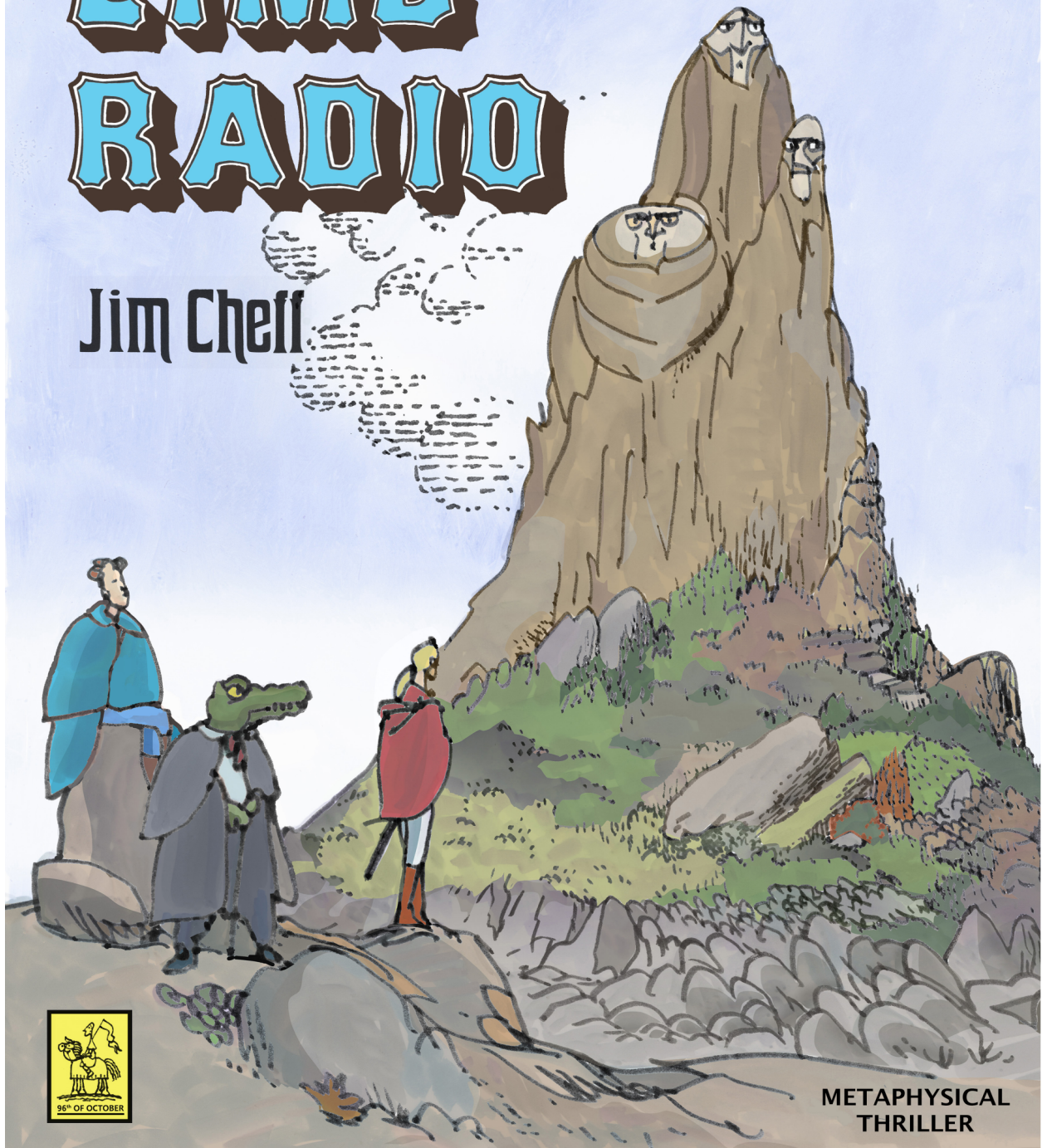


PHANTOM LIMB RADIO

Jim Cheff



METAPHYSICAL
THRILLER

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I

At The Mountains of Vague Misgivings

Damn it! The alarm didn't go off!

Or, rather:

"Damn it! The alarm went off, and he didn't hear it!"

His ears were buzzing, loudly. And he'd had that dream again.

The woman and the birds.

The small mechanical clock had exhausted its ringing more than an hour ago. Vayle Endlight opened his eyes long enough to check the time, then shut them again. He'd wanted to get an early start on the last leg of his journey, in order to reach Barrelslee before dark. He opened his eyes again and fixed his gaze on the now-silent clock. His vision held steady, with no rolling or shifting to the side. That was good. He shook the last traces of sleep from his head and sat up.

The rosy glow of the volcanoes was already being dulled by the white sun, a quarter of the way up the sky. The volcanoes rumbled and spat. They formed a smoky line of rock and redness to the South. He heard nothing of their grumbling.

From a distance, it might have seemed the man had slept with his head resting on his horse, which, legs crossed beneath it, head held erect, had been very still for the duration of the night.

But a closer look would make it obvious that the horse was smaller than a regular horse, or even a pony. And no horse had ever sat so still for so long.

No, it was an artificial horse the man had used as a pillow. Now, in the daylight, one could see it was made of cloth and wire and yarn, knitted and stitched together from bright fabrics and ornaments. It was a hobbyhorse. Not a child's hobbyhorse, but the kind one saw in village festivals, designed for celebratory and ceremonial use.

Vayle Endlight rose and gathered up the supplies and small bundles he'd assembled around the 'horse' before going to sleep. Then he buckled himself into the artificial horse, wearing it at his waist, its decorated head pointing forward. He wore the hobbyhorse (he called it "the Rig") like a big belt. Its body opened sidewise, hinged at the middle. Once it was buckled around his waist, he fastened the shoulder straps.

Endlight attached the 'blanket' he'd slept under to the sides of the horse, so that it fell like a riding gown, down toward the sand. The riding gown bore a striking diamond pattern of red and gold. The Rig was less heavy than it looked. Endlight took off at a brisk pace towards Barrelslee.

From a distance – a much greater distance, now that the sun was up and bright in the sky – one might have thought they saw a man, riding a horse.

Vayle Endlight tried to ignore the buzzing and hissing in his ears and listen to the sounds of the desert. He wasn't listening for the usual sounds – the sharp cries of sand-hawks, or the subtle coaxings of the wind against the dunes — but those other much-more-elusive sounds of the desert radio stations. He heard its vague voices at the edge of his consciousness, and sporadic bits of music — and there, just *there*, was it a fragment of disembodied laughter that he heard?

It was always hard to hear desert radio clearly though, and today his tinnitus completely overwhelmed its murmurs. Endlight wondered if he would lose the ability to hear the radio transmissions, too, when he completely lost his ability to hear the everyday, normal world.

Purposely goofy, and imposing in an absurd way, the Rig's head bobbed as Vayle Endlight walked faster. Small bells jingled from the Rig's fancy bridle.

When Endlight accelerated his walk to a trot, the Rig took over. Vayle and the Rig glided swiftly over the crusty terrain.

Vayle's feet, toes pointed downward, skimmed over the Salt Flats, six inches off the ground.

Heading away from the volcanoes, Vale guided the Rig toward the Salt Flats, that great grey portion of the desert covered with ropy veins of glistening salt. The mountains that were his final destination were just a rocky scribble on the horizon.

His thoughts turned to the dream he'd had, and had been having, for weeks now: The woman and the birds. He'd been seeing the woman in his dreams for much longer than that. Since he was a boy. He never remembered them very well. But lately, the tone of the dreams had changed. Last night, he saw the woman lying on a stone altar under a cloudy sky.

Birds circled, then descended.

The birds tore into her. She became a hot avian pie of birds, the vessel of their bloody internal nesting. They filled her with feather and beak and claw. They fed on her from within, they ate her hair from inside her scalp, they pecked out places behind her eyelids. They left her dazed, the color of ashes, sapped and exhausted.

It was a horrible, disturbing image, and he tried to put it out of his mind. But, not the woman.

He tried to picture her face clearly for the millionth time, and failed.

Vayle glided more slowly through the last miles of the Salt Flats. He was now at the desert's edge and past the reach of the desert radio stations.

He had only the insistent *buzzzz* of the recently begun tinnitus in his right ear, and the familiar, quieter *burrurr* in his left ear. The tinnitus rose and fell in volume. He had good days and bad days. This was a bad day. The mountain towns would be noisy when he got there and that would be hard to take if the tinnitus didn't die down before he got there.

But he had a few quieter stops to make, before his ascent into the mountains.

The first of these would be the clockmaker's shop.

At the base of the Mountains, houses and small dwellings began to appear. He soon reached the clockmaker's place. He handed him the alarm clock. Vayle Endlight's clock was a handsome, box-shaped thing, wrapped on three sides in faded leather. Its face was burgundy and the dial and numbers were the color of sour cream.

"Lower the pitch, please, and make it louder."

He'd made the same request the last time he'd been there. He was losing the higher tones, that was certain.

The clockmaker asked for no explanations and nodded, disappearing into his workroom. The two brass bells at the top of the clock would be replaced by two that were larger, louder, and lower.

While the clockmaker worked, Vayle Endlight searched his shop for useful items. Like most of the shops at the desert's edge, it served more than one purpose. There were books here, and maps, along with other small items useful to the traveler.

Current maps of the Periphery were always of use. The shape and contents of the Periphery were always changing, and the mapmakers published revised maps as often as they could, hoping to keep up. Endlight studied the one with the most recent date of printing. He saw that Coomreedin had crept west since the last time he'd purchased a map. And new towns were appearing in the honeycombed hills near Diloxhyl. The once-towering realm of Serfendry had been sinking into the ground for years, and now seemed to have sunken completely. But a new sand formation had been documented on the other side of the volcanoes. Endlight made a mental note to go there soon to have a look.

He scanned the changes in the dimensions of Whorsnest with less interest, having sworn never to go near it. He saw that its borders had bulged a little, but that should surprise no one.

Then Endlight turned his attention to the books. Books were among his chief pleasures in life, though he only carried a few with him at a time. A small collection was lined up neatly on a low shelf. Endlight chose one with an ornately engraved spine and slid it out from its place on the shelf.

Ah — *Pinapplio, The Pineapple that Yearned to be a Boy*.

Pinapplio was a well-known fantasy tale, an old chestnut that illustrators were attracted to for its wild and risqué imagery. He read a few lines from its first page: "*Pinapplio wanted nothing more than to be a boy, a*

living, real boy, instead of a pineapple. He yearned to tell the rude jokes they told, play their rowdy games, and experience the thrill of their childish conspiracies and ill-timed erections ...”

Vale left with the altered clock, the map he’d chosen, and a tin of hard mints for the friend he was going to see in the mountains.

The Rig bore him into the mountains. Endlight was, perhaps a more impressive sight than he’d have guessed, with his cape and long blond hair, and decorated fake horse.

Behind him the volcanoes were now just a luminous fizz on the horizon. The abrupt and unlikely transition from arid desert to the lush mountain lowlands began in earnest, and the trail became subtly but unmistakably tilted upward.

He passed small farms. Then buildings of stone and impressive masonry became more common, finally culminating in the gabled roofs and chimneys of Barrelslee. It was just before dusk. Lamplighters were beginning their work. The streets were cobbled, and he shared them with other travelers on horseback and in carriages. But most were on foot. There were apothecaries, rooming houses, a grain store, and several pubs. He saw several impressive fountains. Roofs were steepled and covered with curled orange shingles. It was late summer, and the city was full of bright flowers, lush, in striking contrast to the desert he’d left behind him.

The Rig drew little attention from the citizens of Barrelslee, as fashion, or means of transportation. People rode all sorts of beasts and contraptions through the cities and outlands of the Periphery.

Vayle bore the Rig easily, and steered its artificial equine head masterfully through the crowded places. Beneath the gown of the Rig, he walked as one normally would. Travel by means of the Rig — that is, becoming a passenger, a mere rider of its low skimming over the ground — took psychic energy, and more attention from Val than an onlooker might have guessed. In the vast reaches of the desert, letting the Rig “fly” was the best way to cover ground. But in places such as Barrelslee, it was easier to wear the Rig, but walk in the normal fashion.

He navigated the half-remembered streets until, without much difficulty, he found the Musetoreum. The Musetoreum was owned and operated by the friend he had come to see: Vaughn Earl-Royal, who had recently begun referring to himself as ‘The Pale Ontologist.’

Vayle Endlight rang the bell of the Musetoreum and Vaughn Earl-Royal appeared almost instantly. He was a slight man with a high forehead and rather long flat nose, with a pile of great bushy hair on either side of his head.

The two men greeted each other warmly, and Vaughn Earl-Royal guided his guest into the Musetoreum, which was only shown to visitors by appointment and was, but for themselves, empty.

Endlight detached himself from the Rig and left the hobbyhorse folded up neatly in the antechamber. Vaughn Earl-Royal guided him into the Musetoreum's first gallery.

The centerpiece of the room was a huge and monstrous puppet head, with twenty bulging eyes and large box-shaped teeth. Great tufts of camel's hair were fastened in patches to its chin. Green paint was peeling from the surface of the puppet's angry face. At the top of each pointed ear was a metal ring big enough to put one's hand through.

"I'm delighted you got here this evening, Val," Vaughn Earl-Royal said, using the casual version of Endlight's first name. "I'm having dinner at eight with a remarkable friend. I can't wait to introduce the two of you."

Vaughn Earl-Royal's clothing was almost princely, but Vayle Endlight knew that Vaughn Earl-Royal came from modest beginnings. He favored the colors blue and gold, and his outfit was a clear illustration of that preference. He was wearing a periwinkle waistcoat, white breeches with gold buttons, and a short silk cape of very deep blue. The cape had a high collar trimmed with lacy gold ornament. Vaughn Earl-Royal's sense of fashion was considered flamboyant even in cosmopolitan Barrelslee, whose citizens were used to the excesses of foreign visitors' clothing.

Vayle realized that the gold his friend wore was artificial, as was most of the 'gold' on display in the Musetoreum. Vaughn Earl-Royal had some wealth from an inheritance, but he was not rich. Nor did he make much money from the Musetoreum, nor were the items he found and curated there of any real value to anyone but a collector of the most rarefied sort of taste.

Earl-Royal guided Vayle Endlight past costumes on mannequins, smaller crumbling puppets under glass, and the spiked tail of what might have been a mummified dragon, toward his office in the back of the galleries. This was Earl-Royal's inner sanctum, and it was where he kept the truly remarkable stuff.

Vaughn Earl-Royal's inner sanctum was a small but well-appointed place, filled with curiosities and examples of recent advances in metaphysical tools and esoteric machinery. This was the part of Earl-Royal's collection that anyone could see. His more serious finds were only for him and his close circle of friends. Vayle stole glances at items on the shelves he didn't recognize, although he was sure that Earl-Royal would make him formally acquainted with them before the end of the visit. The walls were covered with masks of monstrous faces, and the shelves were lined with fake constructions of all sorts of wild beasts. At the end of the pleasantly lit room was a *papier-mâché* replica of a huge dinosaur bone (Vayle guessed it was a femur). On a cluttered worktable next to it he saw a partially dissected Victrola, and three imposing and ornate sound horns.

Vayle paused to look at a carefully sealed poster inside a thick frame on the wall. It was ancient, and one had to look closely to make the faded image out on the crumbling paper it was printed on. He knew the image, and the history of the poster. It was one of Vaughn Earl-Royal's most-cherished possessions, dating back to the age of the Desert Mummies who'd once roamed the deserts, projecting mystery plays on giant stone screens.

The Desert Mummies were a vanished sect of powerful mystics who'd pioneered the art of 'motion pictures.' The fake monsters and artificial cities Vaughn Earl-Royal hunted down and excavated were made by the Desert Mummies for use in their films. Hundreds of silent films were made by the Desert Mummies before they'd disappeared. Their habit, apparently, was to abandon the props and creatures they created after completion of their films, leaving them to be covered and borne away by the restless movements of the sand.

The life's work of the Pale Ontologist was to bring these strange chimerical deities and artificial gods to the surface; to study and finally display them in the Musetorium. Endlight knew there was a theatre in the lowest floor of the Musetorium where Vaughn Earl-Royal hosted rare screenings of the ancient films.

Earl-Royal had even recovered a few of the actual films of the Desert Mummies, but he kept these finds to himself and a small circle of friends. In one of those ancient films was the giant head displayed in the first gallery. It had been part of a complete puppet, twice the size of a human being. The rings at the side of its head were the fittings for two of the long poles that the puppeteers used to animate the creature, which Earl-Royal thought was a minor demon called Ursevus. Other non-human roles in the Desert Mummies' motion pictures were played by small, animated models. They were animated using a fascinating technique called 'stop-motion.' These could be even more convincing on film than the human-controlled puppets, as they left no clues, on film, as to the artificial cause of their movements.

The Mummies had also devised means of combining these stop motion creatures with live actors, so that the invented creatures, though actually small models like the ones on Vaughn Earl-Royal's display shelf, seemed to tower over their living human co-stars. The people of the Periphery, of the present or the past, had never seen the productions of a Melies or a Harryhausen, but if they had, they might have seen a similarity in their methods of making moving pictures.

There were rumors that the Desert Mummies killed the human cast of their productions after filming, but Earl-Royal said this was probably not true. But they did bury the elaborate sets and props and costumes from their productions in the vast sands of the desert, as soon as a film was completed.

Vaughn Earl-Royal's obsession with the Desert Mummies and their creations was not simply that of an antiquarian. He was convinced that the Mummies were mystics of the highest order, and that the films

they made were the summation of their understanding of existence, and all the forms of consciousness that emerged from it. The stop motion monsters and fantastic creatures in them were icing on the cake.

But back to the poster: the writing on it had crumbled and faded beyond reading. It seemed though to have been so ornate as to raise the possibility that it was not writing at all, but some sort of abstract imagery. The Ontologist said though it was definitely writing, most likely the title of the film and possibly where and when it could be viewed.

The illustrated portion of the poster had fared better. One could still make out carefully rendered image showing a man in ‘wizard’s clothing,’ walking down a mountainous incline, followed by a six of large, intricately-decorated spheres. The spheres seemed to be rolling in a line behind the wizard.

Vayle remembered the first time Vaughn Earl-Royal showed him the treasured movie poster. “This poster was hand-painted, thousands of years ago,” Earl-Royal said reverently (although time was different in the desert, especially under the sand. Time was malleable, and in the deep desert, Time could change its mind about how old something was).

Val had peered into the faded pigment. The huge spheres that followed the wizard looked like children’s toys. They were decorated with swirling stripes, stars, and pinwheels. He imagined in its original colors the picture would have been eye-popping. The balls were the first thing one noticed in the picture, then the wizard, who seemed to be leading their way down the mountainous incline, in his tassel-belted robe and curvy-toed sandals.

The third thing one noticed was the dogs. There was a pack of rambunctious dogs running alongside the balls, which were twice the size of the wizard. The dogs were running gleefully, from what Val could make of the faded image. Their mouths were open, and they seemed jubilant and lively. One had the sense that the dogs were pushing and herding the balls down the slope.

“It should be obvious what this depicts, Val” Vaughn Earl-Royal said, on that first night.

“Of course,” Val answered. “It’s the escape of Pin-Uthra.”

”Exactly!”

The story of Pin-Uthra was a famous one. It was one of the oldest legends in the Periphery. Countless books had been written about it — variations and interpretations, naturally, but all sharing the same basic elements. There were children’s songs about Pin-Uthra. Any doll or statue or picture of a generic wizard was called a ‘Pin-Uthra.’

Tonight though was not the time for studying the poster again. Endlight turned his attention back to Vaughn Earl-Royal, who was again promising that Vayle would be fascinated by the friend they’d be having dinner with. But he hadn’t gotten very far when he stopped and asked: “Val, are you hearing me all right?”

He had noticed that Val seemed to listening with some effort to him since he’d arrived.

Vaughn Earl-Royal knew all about Vayle Endlight's hearing problem. It had started ten years ago with a sudden and disturbing loss of hearing in his left ear. At first, Val could hear nothing through it but a roaring tinnitus and loud bursts of bizarre noises. Sometimes it was like the cracking of ice. Other times, the hum of a machine. And other times, loud, wordless voices, an insistent chorus void of content or meaning. Meanwhile the left ear's ability to hear sounds from the real world was practically nil.

Eventually, these most unsettling effects of the hearing loss receded. But the left ear was left with a sharp and ever-present HISS that was with Endlight to this very day. The hearing in his left ear improved slightly, but what he could hear sounded flat, and distant. Endlight adapted as best he could. He found ways to ignore the tinnitus, and he relied mostly on his right ear, with some small assistance from the diminished left.

He told Vaughn Earl-Royal that he'd recently suffered a second event similar to the first, this time in the right ear.

"I have to say it is maddening," he confessed. "And considerably worse than what I experienced ten years ago, on the other side of my head. If I cover my left ear — strangely, it has now become my 'good' ear — what I hear through the right ear is far off and distorted, like a signal from a very tiny radio receiver. The tinnitus is loud, and the hiss on the left mingles with the humming and buzzing on the right in a totally unsettling manner."

Vaughn Earl-Royal was uncomfortable with bad news, and while he could boast of a great social dexterity, his forte was not the comforting of troubled friends.

So he was relieved when Vayle Endlight's said: "However, I have a plan."

Then Vayle Endlight told Vaughn Earl-Royal what his plan was.

The clock chimed.

"Eight O Clock," Vaughn Earl-Royal said. "We must leave for the restaurant. You'll like my friend Maigraive, Val. He's a most unusual fellow."

The Pale Ontologist took Vayle Endlight to a lofty restaurant with a windowed dining room that overlooked the valley. Endlight followed him though the reception hall where there was a cage full of colorful songbirds. Their twittering sounded flat and off-key to him, and reminded him of the birds in his dreams. He hurried past them.

The dining room was all rich wood and shadows, and a fireplace glowed from the middle of the almost empty room. Night was falling, and through the windows they could see the other side of a deep valley. They could see the lights of a neighboring mountain town beginning to glow. Higher than that, the cliffs drew up and surrendered their details to the encroaching darkness.

Vaughn Earl-Royal led Vayle to the dining room, an enclosed balcony that looked out at the mountains.

One diner sat at a table.

Even if the room had been full, which it was not, Endlight would have guessed that this was the friend that Earl-Royal wanted to introduce him to. The diner was a large crocodilian, broad-shouldered and stout, who amiably raised a stein of beer in their direction as they entered the room. He sat in the chair in the manner that a man would, and he was dressed as a man, too, in a full suit with vest and burgundy cravat, made of a cloth Endlight could not name, but felt certain was expensive. A dark cape was thrown over the back of the crocodile's chair. His mouth was open in a reptilian half-smile that showed a fearsome set of conical teeth, and beneath the immense lower jaw was a bulbous and jowly throat, out of which the crocodilian croaked a jovial "good evening."

Earl-Royal led Vayle to the table with obvious satisfaction and made the introductions. He introduced Vayle to the crocodile first, then followed with: "Vayle, this is my illustrious friend, Cassius Maigraive."

"Delighted!" Cassius Maigraive growled, extending a scaly hand toward Vayle. He added, "I have never regretted meeting a friend of the Pale Ontologist."

Like most people, Vayle Endlight had never met a crocodilian. But he knew a thing or two about them, as they were the stuff of legend in the Periphery. A crocodilian's life — at least the long first half of it, anyway — was spent in battle, far beneath the surface of the mad city of Whorsnest. Only late in life could crocodilians leave the war behind, and make the hard climb to the surface, if they did not perish first in their eternal, subterranean war.

After they'd taken their seats, Vaughn Earl-Royal said to Maigraive: "Val is undoubtedly excited to meet a crocodilian, and is definitely bursting with questions. But he's far too polite to ask them outright. Lest he dance around his curiosity the whole evening, let me impose on you, Maigraive, to tell us about your unusual life, and of course your experience as a crocodile soldier."

Cassius Maigraive nodded good-naturedly and settled back into his chair. "Of course! I would be glad to. To begin with recent history, I came to the surface three years ago almost to the day. Since that emergence, I have made it my business to tour the Periphery as much as possible, and learn its many ways. I have sought to experience as much as I can, in as many places possible. Most recently, I visited the great Fissures of Kazkdan. You may have heard of them. Great splits in the earth where Knowledge itself rises up in steaming clouds! Scholars flock there, to bask in the fumes and soak up as much as they can. Indeed, I found myself growing smarter by the day! But I only stayed a short while."

"Why is that, Cassius?" Val inquired.

"I grew tired of their wise cracks," the crocodile said with a straight face.

Then he tilted his head back and laughed.

Endlight had long considered puns a disappointing form of humor, and he felt that brief letdown at hearing an interesting story suddenly deflated as the set-up for a joke. But he nodded in recognition of the crocodilian's play on words.

The crocodile's opening remarks bore out one part of their legend: they were irrepressible fans of puns, jokes, and comical narratives. It was a remnant of their years of battle in the wet, jam-packed tunnels beneath Whorsnest. Their turgid, clawing warfare took forever, so packed in were they, so while clawing at each other they would tell these stories and jokes to pass the time. Crocodile wars were more an endurance contest than a battle, for there was no apparent goal, no objective, no hill to take, of flag to plant, using stories and puns to pass the time as they tore and bit at each other, while Whorsnestian citizens, far above — their plumbing clogged by the subterranean conflict — cursed their plugged up sinks and toilets.

Crocodiles were soldiers in the young adult stage of their mythic lives. Later, if they reached a full maturity, they would climb their way out of the vast network of plumbing beneath the city. Once in fresh air, they sometimes matured into erudite retired warriors, done with warfare but still fond of the old verbal games they played for so long.

Having just witnessed the crocodilian fondness for puns and plays-on-words, Endlight had a sudden (and correct) intuition that it was Cassius Maigraive who had cleverly combined the two passions of his friend Vaughn Earl-Royal — his love for abstract musings on the nature of Being, and his equal passion for the digging up of ancient things in the desert — into one amusing nom de plume — *The Pale Ontologist* — which reflected his passion for ontology, and his own peculiar form of paleontology. Adding to its cleverness was that it also took on a descriptive dimension, considering Earl-Royal's ghostly complexion.

Thus began a complex and lively discussion as they waited for their meal.

Vayle Endlight and Vaughn Earl-Royal were studious types, and the topics they introduced had to do with ideas. Cassius Maigraive was of a more earthy nature, and his contributions had more to do with news and experiences of the world.

After only a little conversation, and Val reversed his first impression of the crocodile. He found him quite impressive, indeed.

We might privately wonder, during the course of this three-sided conversation, at the erudition of the crocodilian — considering he had only joined those on the surface of the Periphery a few short years ago. Cassius Maigraive had quickly defined himself as an inexhaustible source of gossip, trivia, and indeed bona fide scholarly knowledge, before the first course of the meal had been served. But his knowledge of the surface world was not so great a mystery as to some it might seem. For the sewers, packed with waste

from the denizens of Whorsnest, was a vast informational network of excrement, from which the crocodilians, miles of pipes and plumbing below, absorbed the thoughts and ideas of those who shat into it. One might well become the sort of good-humored scholar that Cassius Maigraive appeared to be, through a lifetime of judicious and well-considered absorption of shit.

This leads us to consider — hastily, before the food arrives — the waste management situation of the wretched city of Whorsnest. While it was true that Whorsnest was a cauldron of ignorance and depravity and the worst that the human recipe could result in, it was also true that among its captive citizens were intelligent and educated souls. The thoughts of these tortured souls were what Maigraive had built his emerging psyche on. Their hard-earned education was what took root and flowered, eventually, in his crocodilian mind.

The higher demons — the *torturers* — of Whorsnest did not use the plumbing at all. Otherwise, only madness and evil would have made its way down to the crocodiles. It was said that the feces of these lunatic flying monsters detonated upon expulsion, and atomized, becoming one with the very molecules of the air which the lesser citizens of Whorsnest breathed.

You see? Whorsnest deserved its awful reputation.

At any rate, this was how it was possible, and common, for crocodilians to "educate" themselves, in a second-hand way, from the city that existed above them. There were soldiers who, once retired, climbed happily up to Whorsnest and stayed there. But there were others, like Maigraive, left the city, and most of its madness, behind them.

And here is the food.

Two waiters brought out platters of roast turkey and spicy gravy, and there was schnitzel and baked potatoes and roasted greens and asparagus. A loaf of black bread was placed within the reach of all three diners, and dishes with slabs of fresh butter. More beer and tall glasses of cold mineral water.

If the crocodile really had spent most of his life in the sewers, he looked and smelled no worse for it. His clothing was clean, and if any scent came from him at all, it was of beer and a subtle but robust cologne. His table manners, too, could not be faulted. He took care to sit back in his chair, so as not to crowd or menace anyone with his long snout. And he handled the silverware with great dexterity, placing the food sidewise into his mouth just at the corner of his great jaws.

Maigraive's exposition on the life of a crocodile soldier was just ending.

"The crocodile war beneath the surface is a cosmological fact. There is, perhaps, no explaining it. But to deny the reality of it is not an option. I myself am living proof of its reality. We are born in the sewers, we fight there, and some of us live long enough to leave the sewers and claw our way to the surface. One "reason" for the whole affair, that I will share with you now, has been proposed. It has been said that

the subterranean war of the crocodiles, the primal heat of it, its lack of ending, is a power source, a sort of engine, that fuels existence on the surface. That its raw brutal power and intensity is the engine of this higher plane of reality. This explanation, if true, makes our war the foundation of the creation of higher worlds. It casts the whole thing in a Divine light. The point of our warfare may be the realization of higher worlds.” The crocodilian asserted this with pride.

The Pale Ontologist said “You appreciate honesty, Cassius, so I’ll say it outright. Crocodiles, wrestling in a sewer full of shit, does not strike me as Divine.”

The crocodile took the comment in stride. “Alas, it is the life we’re born to. An ugly life, perhaps, but it is ours. The fortunate among us find the Divine in what we’re given.”

The two clinked glasses. Vayle recognized it was the good-natured sparring of close friends. (And shall we call Vayle “Val” from now on, too, now that we’ve gotten to know him better?)

Vaughn Earl-Royal decided it was time to change the topic.

He leaned in toward Maigraive and said: “Val’s got the most extraordinary project in the works.”

“Does he?” the crocodile asked, very interested. Val however felt a jolt at Vaughn Earl-Royal’s blunt and unasked-for introduction to Val sharing his plan. It was one thing to tell it to Earl-Royal a few hours ago, in the privacy of the Musetoreum. But he had only known Cassius Maigraive a few hours.

He knew that Vaughn Earl-Royal was proud of his friends’ eccentricities. Was he trying to impress Maigraive with the unorthodox nature of Val’s thinking, and Val’s new, admittedly audacious response to his hearing loss? Earl-Royal had, after all, beamed, when he surprised Val with an unexpected dinner with a crocodilian soldier.

But, what of it? Cassius Maigraive seemed like a deep and unconventional thinker, and not without his share of unusual knowledge. He might have something useful to add to Val’s plan.

So he leaned toward Maigraive as well and spilled the beans.

He told him about his tinnitus, the vertigo, and his rapidly declining hearing. Cassius Maigraive had in fact noticed that Val seemed to be straining to hear the conversation at times. And there were a couple of times he was certain that Val hadn’t caught something that was said, and merely pretended that he had. “I’ve consulted doctors of both the scientific and magical disciplines, with no results. Artificial ears and potions have done no good. Hearing trumpets only make me look silly. To be honest, the situation has caused me a great deal of unhappiness.”

“No doubt,” the crocodile said.

Magic and Medicine were on mostly equal footing in the Periphery. Both Magic and Medicine were for the most part crude and unreliable callings, and both had their share of quacks, cure-barkers and con men. Both doctors and witches preyed upon the desperate and gullible, and many suffering people saw both

professions as a last resort. But of the two, Magic was the most popular approach to things in the Periphery. It was the experience of all three diners in this conversation that non-ordinary means were the best solutions to both physical and metaphysical problems.

Val Endlight had abandoned the practice of consulting doctors about his hearing loss, and had come to consider more fantastic ways of combating it. But magic had failed him in this regard as decisively as science.

“Having tried a variety of spells and enchantments and consulted witches, oracles, and magicians of many persuasions, none of whom were able to stop the deterioration of my hearing, I have imagined a way of exploiting the dimensions of my apparently incurable and progressive loss of hearing. To adapt to it, with gusto!”

Val leaned forward. “Have you heard of the phenomenon called the ‘phantom limb’? Cases where a person loses an arm or leg, through amputation or accident, but after recovery from the loss, continues to feel pain and sensation in the missing limb?”

The crocodilian nodded from the other side of the table. Of course, Val realized. Of all the diners in the room, it was Cassius Maigraive who was most likely to be familiar with it.

“In the sewers, many of us lost limbs. I remember the complaints of soldiers, who felt tingling, or outright pain, in limbs they’d lost, years before.”

“I am told that tinnitus – the maddening hiss I hear in my damaged ears each day — is a form of the phantom limb phenomenon,” Val said. “The brain seeks to supply information to an area that is suddenly void of it. Tinnitus is the phantom limb of the inner ear. What vacant space is left by a loss of hearing is filled by the roar and hiss of tinnitus, courtesy of the brain.

“But why does the brain throw garbage in? The brain is a versatile and some say mostly-untapped organ. Why can it not fill that space with something more valuable?”

“I see,” said the crocodile. “You would ask that the brain, your brain, fill the vacuum of your deafness with something more than auditory nonsense.”

It was the idea that Val had explained to Vaughn Earl-Royal earlier in the evening. Earl-Royal found the idea audacious, but interesting.

“Look at the desert radio stations! They pull their sounds and voices from the ether; some would say the Sourceworld itself. Can my brain, my very advancing deafness, be made to do as much?”

Maigraive nodded. Val was clearly modeling his project on those desert radio stations, which, theoretically, pulled signals from the Sourceworld and the DreamSuck, and broadcast them to able receivers. (The DreamSuck was supposedly made up of fragmented consciousness emanating from the inhabitants of the Sourceworld, though the existence of both of those realms had never been definitively verified.)

It could not be disputed, though, that the mysterious radio stations did pick up signals from somewhere.

Considering this, Cassius Maigraive allowed that Vayle Endlight's plan for erecting radio towers in the wilderness of his own psyche was not so absurd as might initially seem.

Val imagined the current state of his hearing as a tilted, asthmatic antenna on a plane of bare rocks and scrub-grass. This antenna was the source of the Hiss, the Tinnitus — could that tower be reimagined, tilted upright, energized, medicated, corrected, to broadcast something more than loud, empty air? Could a radio “station” be connected to that tower, one that offered more than sonic gibberish?

“I am proposing that my ears – the very deafness of them – become a radio receiver — ”

“A ‘phantom limb’ radio station!” Maigraive said, finishing Val's thought.

“Yes!”

The Pale Ontologist thought Val's idea had merit, and he could tell that Maigraive thought so too. For the Ontologist, the thing that made it compelling was its use of the brain. No other organ — through inspiration, injury, or distress — was capable of producing such varied and intriguing responses. The stomach, liver, intestines, *et cetera*, were all mere sacks of blubber by comparison. Their knee-jerk responses to stimulus were so boring and unimaginative! Those organs interested Vaughn Earl-Royal only when they caused him discomfort.

The brain, on the other hand, was an unexplored continent, a world even, and the things it could yield when courted and enhanced by its owner were prodigious. He thought first of drugs, of absinthe, of the hallucinatory mushrooms that were traded and revered in the mountains. Also, there were those confounding maladies that could be traced back to the gray organ, and the peculiar effects they produced in the afflicted.

Val's idea had reminded Earl-Royal of his mother, who had slowly gone blind. She had experienced a strange altering of her perceptions in the later stages of her deteriorating eyesight.

To support what Val was describing to Maigraive, Earl-Royal shared this anecdote:

“As my mother's sight deteriorated, leaving large gaps in what she could see, but also leaving fragments of her vision intact, she began to see in the ‘blank spots’ things that were not there. For example: when we looked at photos, she would see those who actually were in the photograph, but others who weren't in the photo as well. She would insist that a picture of two people was actually a picture of three.

"As her blindness progressed further, she began to see two girls in fancy dresses in her living quarters. The girls were silent and non-threatening, and she came to enjoy their occasional presence. Especially as those people around her, of the ‘real world,’ had been reduced to dim shadows.”

Val was familiar with the tale. “A very similar thing to the predicament of my own brain, filling my head with the Tinnitus. But I would ask that my ‘two silent girls’ speak. And who knows what they might tell me? Or what unearthly song might they sing? I would ask more, in exchange for the loss of my hearing.”

Vaughn Earl-Royal observed: “Val is always looking for information! My mother was only seeking only companionship. She was quite satisfied with her two silent girls.”

Now that the plan had been discussed, Val was delighted that Maigraive, who seemed a no-nonsense sort, was not dismissive of it. Maigraive seemed to not only find his idea intriguing, but delightful — in a mad, improbable way, of course.

“The Improbability Factor is, naturally, a part of its projected success,” Val said to the crocodile.

“It would have to be,” Maigraive affirmed. “I would advise avoiding even the smallest concessions to good sense in the pursuit of this goal. Stick to the preposterous, and it may work!”

The dining room had filled up since they had arrived, and the conversation in the room was becoming hectic and confusing to Val’s beleaguered ears. He excused himself for the restroom.

“Your friend is quite mad,” the crocodile said to the Pale Ontologist once Val had left the table. “I could become fond of him.”

For some reason, public lavatories were a bizarre affair in the Periphery, each with its own confusing rules of etiquette and behavior. More often than not, using one was not worth the embarrassment, and the exertion of social dexterity that was required. He was relieved to find that the situation here was simple and forthright, and that he was the only visitor.

Vayle stepped up to the urinal and released the kraken.

Minutes later Val was back with his friends in the dining room. Night had fallen completely, and the mountains were covered with glowing dots, and the drifting fireflies of balloons and airships.

Vaughn Earl-Royal was feeling pleased at the combination of his two friends, Val and Cassius. They seemed to get along admirably. Earl-Royal, who considered social matchmaking a talent of his, was proud of that the combination of Endlight and Maigraive appeared so promising.

Beyond that were those secret hopes he had of what would come of making the introduction. His next and most exciting project to date depended on the cooperation of both Val and Maigraive. A darker thing flickered in his mind, the thing he feared would make his proposal dangerous for all of them — but he pushed that dark misgiving aside. He sipped his beer, and sparred amiably with Maigraive, until Val returned to the table.

Val got another look at Cassius Maigraive as he found their table again. This time Val noticed the powerful ridged tail of the crocodilian, curled sideways from the chair and extending downward to disappear under the table.

Val mused that Cassius Maigraive could probably have killed all of the diners in the restaurant in a matter of minutes, and eaten half of them in the same amount of time. He had noticed guests at other tables sneaking uneasy looks at the retired reptilian warrior. But Maigraive had done nothing to suggest he was anything other than the most jovial and well-mannered diner in the room.

They had dessert. Raspberry tortes were brought to them on a silver plate, along with a variety of wrapped chocolates.

Late in the evening — when they had talked of psychic radio stations and the theory of derivative worlds, and silent, imagined girls and mysterious signals in the desert — the Pale Ontologist, Vaughn Earl-Royal, gave his reason for calling his two friends to this meeting.

“After much research and inquiry,” he said, “I have come into possession of a map. As you both know, the driving passion of my work is the reassembly of the works of the Desert Mummies, primarily based on the recovery of their films and the props and mechanisms they used to create them. I am now certain of the location of some abandoned props from the creation of their greatest film (it is said, though I have never seen it) *The Escape of Pin-Uthra*.”

“The magician?” Maigraive asked.

“The wizard,” Vaughn Earl-Royal corrected.

He continued. “Conditions of the A.F.O.M., and the unstable dimensions of the Periphery, have long made the recovery of these artifacts impossible. But these conditions have shifted. The artifacts are now within my reach, and the map could be followed to them by a modest expedition of just three adventurers. I propose that the three of us are that trio.”

“And what would we be looking for?” Maigraive asked. “A papier-mâché Cyclops, or a painted backdrop? I hope there’s no digging involved in this scheme ...”

“The spheres are hidden in easily-accessible tunnels, Maigraive. Not buried.”

“Spheres?” Val said. He remembered the decorated spheres from the poster in Vaughn Earl-Royal’s Musetorium.

“The same,” the Ontologist confirmed. “What a find, eh? The film itself has eluded me for decades, but to have the spheres created for its production would be amazing!”

“Can you be certain of your information, though, Vaughn?” Val said.

“I have it on the highest authority.”

Val nodded. He knew that Earl-Royal was a master of research, with a whole network of eccentric but highly educated friends who might well know about a thing like this.

“How modest an expedition are you talking about?” Maigraive wanted to know. He knew the Ontologist’s modest projects often grew prodigiously in the course of being pursued.

“I can show you,” the Ontologist said, removing a folded map from the pocket of his cape.

He spread it out on the table. The complex map meant nothing to either Val or Cassius Maigraive.

“We can be there and back again in a month’s time,” Vaughn Earl-Royal said, running his finger over a crazy quilt of lines and instructions. After we leave the desert we will have to travel A.F.O.M. But Val and I are up to that, Maigraive.”

Traveling A.F.O.M. was a paranormal method of enhanced travel through the real world. It was difficult, even for those few who were able to do it. Navigation through A.F.O.M. territories was notoriously demanding.

“This route is far beyond my skills, Vaughn,” Val said.

“But well within my own,” Vaughn Earl-Royal replied.

“The map is written in your own hand,” Val observed.

“Yes! I copied it from the original, which I have put away for safekeeping. But rest assured, Val, this map is not guesswork or supposition on my part.”

Maigraive said “Seems like a lot of work for some props from an ancient motion picture.”

But he said this mostly to annoy Vaughn Earl-Royal.

“Work? I speak of adventure!” the Pale Ontologist cried. He said it with such panache that a sleepy waiter, anxious to shut down the restaurant for the night, looked over.

From down the hall Val heard the tinny chirping of the birds.

II

Swords Against Sleepwalkers

For the second morning in a row, Cassius Maigraive came to Vayle Endlight's room covered in blood. The blood was not his own.

At the crocodilian's hip was a broadsword in a decorated scabbard — a gift from Vaughn Earl-Royal, the Pale Ontologist. Between hilt and scabbard, blood oozed.

Like the spatters and stains on Maigraive's vest and suit coat, the blood was grey.

“Another night of hunting?” Endlight inquired.

The crocodilian nodded affirmatively. “Incredible fun, Val,” he said with obvious satisfaction. “You should have joined me.”

In the week since Vaughn Earl-Royal had summoned Val to Barrelslee, Val and Cassius Maigraive had become firm friends. Val had to endure some truly awful puns, the humor of which he still did not perceive, but he found Maigraive's company overall to be immensely satisfying. His wit (beyond the puns) was quick and entertaining, and he was surprisingly well informed on any number of topics. He also showed a great depth, and, beneath his blunt exterior, a compassionate and thoughtful nature.

Maigraive, in turn, had developed an equal affection for Val in the short time he'd known him.

Vaughn Earl-Royal had introduced Cassius Maigraive to a sort of game since he had arrived in Barrelslee. Barrelslee was experiencing a strange phenomenon. Naked, spectral sleepwalkers were roaming the city's cobbled streets in the late hours. Unseen by most, they wandered aimlessly and creepily in the shadows. Vaughn Earl-Royal knew of them through the army of "sources" that kept him informed on supernatural events in the mountain region. Vaughn claimed that the sleepwalkers were the shades of unfortunate dreamers whose astral forms were stuck between the everyday world and the realm of dreams. He said they suffered in this condition, and that the more of them that walked the city in this state, the more other dreamers would be dragged down too, into the same sorry state of affairs. It was an altruistic act, he maintained, to release these poor sleepers.

The means of doing this were unconventional, but, he was pleased to explain, well suited to Maigraive's skills and natural inclinations. One could release the sleepwalkers by killing them — specifically, hacking them to death with a sword. He assured Maigraive that it would cause no harm to the innocent sleeper in everyday life. He compared it to obliterating a shadow by casting bright light on it: the shadow would vanish, but the thrower of the shadow remained unharmed. But what fun it would be to stalk these creatures, and do their hosts the favor of murdering them! Maigraive had confided to Vaughn Earl-Royal that the violent tendencies of his previous life were always with him, and caused him an unfortunate restlessness and anxiety. Against his better judgment, but curious,

nonetheless, Val had let Maigraive talk him into joining him for a night of hunting. Val and Maigraive had spent a week now in Barrelslee, following their first dinner together. In this time neither of them had seen much of Vaughn Earl-Royal, who was busy making the preparations for their expedition.

Maigraive took great pleasure in tracking down the sleepwalkers, then hacking them to bloody mush with his sword. Whereupon, thankfully, the dismembered phantoms would vanish, as if they'd never been there. Maigraive had urged Val to accompany him on these nightly forays, but except for the first outing, he declined. He had an aversion to violence, even this unworldly, ghostly type.

Maigraive, a retired soldier, was used to such things. But Val couldn't imagine chopping a sleeping person to bits, particularly a woman.

"Nonsense," Maigraive had huffed, when Val said this. "Two hacks with a broadsword and you can't even tell the difference! It's great fun, I tell you."

"For a psychopath," Val had answered, smiling.

The sleepwalkers were never children, it was noted, and Val wondered, but didn't ask, if his sword-wielding friend would have drawn the line at that. But, some of Maigraive's homicidal zeal can be excused. The sleepwalkers could not be dispatched with a civilized stabbing or even a decisive decapitation. If these modest efforts were employed, the assassin was left with a disturbingly mutilated, still writhing phantom. And once attacked, the sleepwalkers did make

noise. They would scream and carry on, and all discretion on the part of the attacker would have been wasted. So the kill had to be final, and gorily brutal. Val had asked if the sleepwalkers could speak. Would they answer a question if asked?

“No,” he answered. “The screams are just a primal response. At least to the outside world, they have no real thoughts. They walk in this world, but any intelligence in them is locked away in their dreaming. And Earl-Royal assures me, killing a sleepwalker does not harm to the sleeper.”

At first, the somnambulists sounded like poor fuel for excitement, with their closed eyes and slow movements, and the fact that they had no weapons, and made no effort to fight back. What made the matter interesting for Maigraive was that he had to assassinate them out of view of the waking residents of Barrelslee. There were laws against random killing there, even in case of spectral manifestations, so Maigraive had to keep his attacks secret and out of sight.

Maigraive enjoyed the intrigue of it, and the drama of playing the assassin.

Val and Maigraive walked the darkened streets of the city, and it wasn't long before they spotted a sleepwalker. It was exactly as Vaughn Earl-Royal had described.

They followed the vague form down the narrow streets of Barrelslee, losing sight of it again and again. Maigraive's eyes, after decades in the dark, were keener than Val's. The sleepwalker never lost them for long. The sleepwalker was ghostly, but not transparent.

When it stepped into light, it was fully illuminated, as any physical body would be. But it merged better into the dark spots than a normal human would. Leaving an alley for a well-lit street, Val saw the wandering sleepwalker clearly.

It was a middle-aged naked man. The eyes were closed, which might account for its tentative, uncertain course through the city.

Maigraive leaped, and cut the thing to bloody ribbons. Having taken it completely by surprise, and nearly halved its body vertically with the first blow, the sleepwalker didn't put up any sort of fight, or cry out. It did however spray the empty street with a great fountain of grey blood. It continued to do so as Maigraive took it apart with his broadsword, till it was nothing more than a bloody pile of not-much on the pavement.

Then, even the grey not-much vanished.

Maigraive was exhilarated. "It's remarkable! They feel just like flesh and bone when you first cut into them!"

Maigraive was born for violence. He enjoyed seeing the effects of his brutality here, out of the darkness and claustrophobic confines of the sewers, though he enjoyed the chopping more in the fashion of a skilled butcher than a warrior, as his victims put up no more resistance than a prime cut of beef.

Val had decided that one night of this activity was enough for him. Maigraive carried on the nocturnal sport alone.

Now, seated in Val's rented room in the light of morning, Cassius Maigraive studied the grey bloodstains on his coat sleeves, and was disappointed to see them fade away to nothing.

Today they would begin the expedition.

Outside of Val's rented room, Maigraive eyed the Rig with curiosity, but he asked no questions. It was obviously a magical sort of acquisition, if not a magical entity in its own right, and therefore a matter of privacy on Val's part. Val would tell him more about the unusual 'horse' when he was ready to.

Modest displays of magic were common throughout the Periphery, but it still took Maigraive a few minutes to get used to the sight of his friend gliding alongside him on his make-believe horse. The levitation of the hobbyhorse didn't raise eyebrows as they left the town for the outer roads. It was more the colorful markings of Val's mount that caught attention: the colored tassels, the quilted, brightly colored gown, and the multicolored, braided mane.

Suspecting though that anything more than a trot might be beyond the enchanted steed's abilities, and perhaps less than dignified for its rider, Maigraive limited his own, real, horse to a leisurely gait. He wondered if it was truly the hobbyhorse that was enchanted, independent of Val, or if his new friend had a more considerable flair for magic than he knew. Vaughn Earl-Royal had promised to meet them with the animals they would actually be riding on their expedition, but he hadn't said what kind of animals those were. Only that they were the perfect beasts for the job. So, at any rate, Val would not be riding the Rig for the bulk of their journey.

Summer was rapidly showing signs of departure as the man and the crocodilian clopped and glided over the country roads. The wildflowers were still bright, but less exuberantly so. They drooped a bit, as if embarrassed by the fragrant audacity they'd shown just a few weeks prior.

Arriving at last at the designated farmhouse, their mounts for the trip were revealed. Val saw Vaughn Earl-Royal holding the reins of a huge animal that resembled a giant snail. But it was not a snail; rather it was a sponge. Its roughly textured body was full of deep pocks a foot deep, and thick fissures and irregularities.

The animal was loaded down with rolled tents and packaged supplies and bundles. One end of the sponge was slightly more tapered than the other, and rose a good ten feet above the ground. This was the head of the beast, although the head wasn't any different than the rest of its body. The bridle was wrapped around it here, and as they got closer, Val saw that the sponge was saddled as well. There were two other sponges on the grass in front of a small stable.

"Our desert chariots, Gentlemen!" Earl-Royal announced as they drew near.

Vaughn Earl-Royal was in a fine mood. He greeted them warmly. "Having fun dispatching sleepwalkers, Cassius? He asked, smiling.

"A magnificent sport," Maigraive affirmed. "But, I am ready for other adventures."

“And you shall have them,” Earl-Royal promised. “These magnificent animals are sponges. What do you think of them? They have a mysterious metabolic ability to generate moisture in even the driest climes. Their diet consists of on sand, which they absorb rather than eat. At the same time, they secrete a water-like liquid that is digestible by humans. Perfect animals for a desert expedition!” Val had seen them before from a distance. But he had never ridden one.

Vaughn Earl-Royal walked up to Val and handed him a belted sword.

“Are you expecting danger?” Val asked. The sword surprised him. There typically wasn’t much danger in the desert, for all its isolation. Those who were attracted to life there were not adventurers. They were mostly scholars, artists, monks, aesthetes and peaceful loners. In the cities, desert dwellers were thought of as the biggest pussies you could imagine.

“I’d be quite surprised,” Vaughn Earl-Royal answered. “Still, we will be traveling the off-roads of reality. Let’s project an air of being able to defend ourselves. And, if anything does threaten to cause us harm — we have Maigraive!”

“Indeed,” muttered Maigraive. He wasn’t paying much attention. He was immersed in the intricacies of figuring out how a crocodile should mount a giant sponge.

Vaughn Earl-Royal wore a rapier at his own waist, one with a swept hilt and finely worked scabbard.

Val obliging buckled the sword to his waist, once he’d freed himself of the Rig. He folded the Rig and secured it to the back of

the sponge. The upholstered saddle of the sponge was well above the height of his head. But he climbed to it easily when it was time, finding footholds in the pockets and canals of the sponge's flanks. Val's boots and breeches were wet by the time he reached the high saddle. The upper portion of the sponge — which brayed complacently as Val found his place on its back — was dry and rough. But the lowest portion of it was full of moisture. Maigraive mounted with considerably less ease, but managed the task.

Then Vaughn Earl-Royal took to his saddle, and they were off.

The sponges were bigger than horses, smaller than dragons.

The three rode toward the base of the mountain.

Val had never ridden a sponge, but he knew they were prized for desert travel. The sponges slid on a sheet of self-generated moisture. Beneath the sponges a sparkling wet mist frothed against the soil. The slide of the sponges was smooth and surprisingly swift. They would be going down the opposite side of the mountain that Val had come up. When they reached the foot of the mountain, they would cross the southernmost portion of the desert, and after that, they would travel A.F.O.M., *Away From Other Men*.

Val noted with disappointment that his vision was starting to shift to the right: the slow, shuffling that preceded a vertigo attack. He made up his mind to fend off the episode. It wouldn't bode well to have one, on the very morning of their departure.

He fixed his gaze upon a lone skinny cypress in the distance, jutting up from behind a stony ridge. He mentally 'locked it in.' He willed it to stay in one place and not shift to the side. This worked, sometimes, and when it did, the impending vertigo would pass. If that didn't work, and the cypress started sliding repetitively to the right, he would try to focus on something closer. It was always the things furthest away that spun first.

He was greatly relieved when the feeling passed, and he felt well again.

There were many ways to support oneself in the Periphery. It was a country of travelers, so most towns had an abundance of jobs for transient workers. Times were good, and there was a general air of fortune and opportunity. No one seemed to job-hunt for long. Both Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal were often employed as tutors. Val had a small but steady income from a well-received book he'd written.

We see this illustrated at one of the first stops on the travelers' journey, a cottage publishing house almost lost in a cloud of bright cypresses and aspens.

It was Val's good fortune to have written a book that had become popular in both mountain and desert. It was a collection tales, mostly factual, of his solitary travels in the dunes and what lay beyond them. The publisher had given the book its title: "An Endlight Companion," and since its first pressing Val had enjoyed a reputation as an intrepid traveler and skillful teller of tales. Many of

his stories were of things he'd heard, as opposed to done. Val was more a collector of tales than an active protagonist.

A complex wooden press was printing pages as they entered the shop; an earnest-looking man dressed all in knit clothing was turning the wheel. He stopped his work and he and Val exchanged pleasantries. Then without being asked, the man looked up the sum of Val's uncollected royalties and paid him in full.

"Any more manuscripts on the way then, Val?" the publisher inquired. In fact there was.

While Val and the publisher talked, Vaughn Earl-Royal tended to the sponges. The animals were less suited to the high desert than the low, so they would be traveling at a leisurely pace for the first part of the trip. Once they reached the vast low sweep of the desert proper, they would pick up the pace, and the sponges would glide them with great speed over the miles of crystal sand. Maigraive, meanwhile, looked over the display of books the publisher and his crew had recently printed. Stories and tall tales might be the true currency of the Periphery, Maigraive reflected. They were consumed and traded with so much more gusto there than money.

There were scholarly books and treatises on both magic and the sciences. But the passion of the people was fantastic tales, and tales of adventure in imagined places. Most of the books he inspected were of this sort. Of the most fantastic stories, the chief topic was the greatly avoided city of Whorsnest. Books with lurid covers depicting the horrors of the place offered tales of tragic adventurers who labored in the far-off city of pain. No human author had ever

been there, nor had any unfortunate human born in Whorsnest ever made its way out; so the tales were sheer morbid fantasy. No human in the Periphery knew the nature of Whorsnest first-hand, so the stories were apocryphal and made of utter, usually bombastic, speculation. Maigraive was in a unique position in that he had actually been in Whorsnest for a short time. He had emerged from the sewers directly into Whorsnest, as retired crocodilians do. He was aware that most of these crocodilians found the mad city to their taste, and quickly lost themselves in the violent spectacle of its fevered world. Maigraive remembered little of what he had experienced there. But he could attest that it was as horrible as the writers as these writers of pulp fiction imagined. He resisted trying to recollect the details of what he saw there. But he was certain these sensationalist fantasies fell a great deal short of capturing the hellish nature of the real place. The education and interests Maigraive had absorbed in the sewers had been carefully selected by his proclivity for independence and resistance to group madness. So he had left Whorsnest, which was possible for a non-human, before it consumed him. He'd had no choice but to live and fight in the sewers, but above ground, he asserted his free will while he still had it. He studied the cover of one slim volume with an elaborate cover (*Hell-Pirates of Whorsnest*) before returning it the shelf. He chose another book, and left some small coins on the counter.

An assistant took up the wheel of the printing press and Val and the publisher talked over the clackety-clack of it. "For many years, I have been recording the messages on the travelers' board at

desert towns and outposts. I have told you about them: travelers record their experiences, and impressions of things they saw during their trips. They leave notes for friends and tips and clues and warnings.

“Of particular interest to me, however, have been the notes of things *heard* — on the radio broadcasts from the desert radio stations, or during the soundstorms that occur in the wilder places. People jot down words they recall hearing in such a way, the fragments of songs, the names, and bits of stories they can remember. For, yes, the broadcasts and storms are notoriously hard to remember once one has heard them. But those of us who jot things down have found that we have heard the same things, or things very similar. We see things on the bulletin boards that jog our memories — and as a result whole parts can be realized from what was previously a scattering of fragments.

“What I have tried to do is collect these scattered bits and compile them, in the way musicians have tried to collectively reconstruct songs and compositions from the fleeting signals. I have no musical training, I therefore concentrate on the words and phrases I hear and recall ...

“Of course I would give credit to anyone who asked for it, but most of the postings are anonymous. I’m not aware of any but the most modest attempts to compile them ...”

The publisher nodded slowly. Most people in the cities considered things heard on the desert radio stations to be as valuable as the peculiarities of the sounds that wind makes — that is, not very.

But there *was* that niche group Val spoke of who found such esoteric things fascinating. And, there was Vayle Endlight's already-established reputation ...

"*Recovered Transmissions from the Desert*, we might call it," Val concluded.

"*Stolen Words and Whispers*," the publisher said, decisively. "Sounds almost scandalous! Finish your book, and I'll sic the typesetters on it."

Two days later they had passed through Witches' Teeth, and were touring the small, odd villages that were neither mountain nor desert.

When night fell they pitched tents in the spaces between the towns, and dined on the remarkable assortment of foods the Ontologist had packed for their journey.

On the third night of camping, with the last of the real towns far behind them, Vaughn Earl-Royal produced an unusual bottle from one of his bags. It was a tall bottle made of yellow glass. The neck of the bottle had an unusual twist to it. Its cork was a deep shade of red.

Val couldn't read the label, but there was an elegant symbol etched on the glass. It showed a stylized silhouette of the very creature they'd been riding all day.

"Yes," the Pale Ontologist said, proud that neither of his companions was familiar with the delicacy he'd brought to share with

them. “The fermented foam of the sponges has a delightful and intoxicating effect on the mind.”

Above them, the Fighters in the Night Sky had risen. Their blocky, star-dotted forms had begun their slow, martial arts movements in the sky. They spun, kicked, and threw slow punches.

Vaughn Earl-Royal and Cassius Maigraive drank, and studied the movements of the Fighters.

Their celestial combat was nothing like the fighting of crocodiles. Crocodile fighting was all clawing and chewing and twisting and scraping. The giant fight in the sky was one of pirouettes and precisely timed blows; it was all grace and power and strategy. Val wished that he too could drink the liquor of the sponges, but its effects were too much like those of alcohol, so he resisted. He took just the tiniest sip. It tasted like black lemons and fireworks.

He was content to enjoy the hashish that he usually carried with him. He had always preferred smoking to drinking. Maigraive declined Val’s pipe when it was offered. No doubt the maneuvers required to smoke from a small pipe would put too many demands on the crocodilian anatomy. But the Pale Ontologist had some puffs, between sips of the sponge liquor, and, in a short time, the three were settled comfortably on the sand, enjoying their buzzes, beneath the fighting night sky.

The next few days of travel would bring them to the desert, and a few days more would bring them to the A.F.O.M.

Put any three fellows in the desert, traveling for hours through the relatively unchanging scenery and their intoxicants of choice, and secrets are bound to come out.

On their third night of travel, again beneath the spinning, silent blows of the two Fighters, the whole story about Val's dreams of the woman and the birds came out.

Maigraive made an observation that Val was not a quiet sleeper. The anxious look Val gave Maigraive led him to say: "Don't worry, my friend, you don't talk in your sleep, or make embarrassing sounds. But you do toss and turn."

The Pale Ontologist said, casually: "Tell Maigraive what you dream about, Val. Why not? We're all friends."

Again, exposed by Earl-Royal's injudicious tongue! At this rate, Val would have no secrets by the end of the expedition. But he did trust Cassius Maigraive, so he complied. "I dream of a woman -- almost every night, lately. I have always dreamt of her, but the dreams have changed. She is in some sort of danger now. She is suffering."

"How interesting" Cassius Maigraive said, leaning in.

Val nodded. "I see her in a barren landscape. She lies on some sort of altar. She is menaced by birds that attack her and dig their way under her flesh. I believe this woman truly exists, and that she is a resident of the Sourceworld.

"And I wonder: If she is indeed a resident of the Sourceworld ... and if the signals pulled in by the desert radio stations are signals from the Sourceworld ... might it not be possible to receive 'signals'

from this Sourceworldian woman, if I truly put my mind to it? Perhaps I am doing so already, in the crude form of dreams. It is my conviction that she is trying to make contact with me, and has been trying all my life.”

“I see,” Maigraive said. “But I have always supposed that the signals received and broadcast by the radio stations were random. What you’re proposing is a very specific form of contact, in intent, if not actual reception. That is, you believe this woman is manifesting in hopes, conscious or unconscious on her part, of making contact specifically with you. That is much more than a sensitivity to the presence of a displaced presence originating in the Sourceworld. And, if I am honest, it is much less likely.”

The crocodilian said this with a gentle forthrightness, unlike the more confrontational tone he took when he bantered philosophically with Vaughn Earl-Royal.

The Pale Ontologist shared Maigraive’s skepticism. He did believe that there was something about Val’s dreams of this woman that distinguished them from the usual dreaming.

And there were plenty of people who subscribed to the notion of star-crossed lovers, born in the Sourceworld, and destined to reunite in the Periphery. Vaughn Earl-Royal wasn’t one of them. Residents of the Sourceworld — which he definitely believed in — might have some vague personal connection to certain residents of the Periphery. But if they did, it was a loose connection with even looser influence, perhaps like the vague push and pull of the Zodiac. What Val was proposing was a romantic illusion, caused by the

commonality of images pulled into their world from the DreamSuck, which swirled between the two worlds of the Sourceworld and the Periphery.

He did not discourage Val's insistence on his connection to this woman being more than that, but privately, he put no stock in it.

Cassius Maigraive had his own theory about links between the Sourceworld and the Periphery, and he shared it now with Val. "Some believe that people on the Sourceworld connect to our world through a desire to escape suffering they experience in their own. Some scholars believe that our own world has less metaphysical restrictions than the Sourceworld, and the residents of our world experience less suffering. Perhaps this is the case with the woman in your dreams."

Val nodded, glad that Maigraive had not dismissed the topic as mere fantasy.

"There may be something to that. But I have seen her in my dreams since I was a boy. And she is only suffering in the dreams I've had lately. She has aged along with me over the years — I have not mentioned that I originally saw her as a little girl. However much she seems to suffer now, this was not always so.

There was another aspect to the dreams of the woman and that birds that complicated things, and Val explained it to Maigraive.

The woman in his dreams submitted to the birds without resisting. She suffered, surely — there was no doubt of that. But she endured their torments as a participant rather than victim. The dreams he'd had lately left vague recollections of the woman guided

to the dais by hooded figures. But they did not compel her. She did not struggle as they laid her down, as they fastened her arms and legs to the smooth white table. When the birds came, she kept still as they landed, and began their savage burrowing. There was blood, yes, but not as much as one might expect. They went in beak first, under the skin, and the flesh sealed up tight again behind them.

"So there may be truth to your theory. There may be truth to that. Suffering, or a need to escape it, could indeed forge connections between worlds. But the consistent presence of this woman in my dreams throughout my life convinces me that this is more than just the singular catching of a random signal. It convinces me there is a connection between this woman and I, wherever she is, and that the connection is personal rather than general."

Vaughn Earl-Royal had stayed out of the conversation. At this point though, he broke his silence and said: "Val, you've come this far in your 'confession.' You may as well go all the way. Tell Maigraive what connection you believe you and this woman have."

Val did not mind Vaughn Earl-Royal's coaxing at this point. He found that he wanted Maigraive to know the whole story, and even, eventually, to believe it.

Val said "I believe that, in a way I cannot even pretend to explain ... this otherworldly woman is my wife."

The expedition continued the next morning.

This was the longest part of the trip, and modest in incident. The three abandoned conversation. It was hard to hear each other

over the sliding of the sponges over rough sand; and the desert heat lent itself to inward, shaded thoughts. Val contemplated his radio station, in fact he strove to build it, imagining towers and antennas in his mind, and planting them deep in the far-flung reaches of his psyche. He conceived them in great detail, and oversaw them plunging from the sky and planting themselves deep in the red soil of his mind. He even listened for signals. What he got however was ... HISSS, from the left. BURRR, from the right.

Our three travelers followed rivers, labored up mountain trails, enjoyed the occasional grand vista, and so on. They traveled in silence, and Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal concentrated on maneuvering their trip into the realm of the A.F.O.M.

So let us take the time, leaving them to their thoughts, to explore more fully the world in which they live, and the hypothetical geography of their cosmos.

The geography of the flat, endless world of our three travelers was generally agreed upon. The center of everything was the awful, locked city of Whorsnest. Around Whorsnest were the mountains, and then the deserts and transient oceans, of what was called the Periphery. The Periphery was a Big Bang of uncharted territories, expanding constantly in all directions, leading to who knows where.

One might wonder why Whorsnest, that bloated urban boil of perpetual suffering was considered the center of things. Was it because it sat squarely atop the DreamSuck? Why were the expanding outer lands considered “peripheral,” rather than central, with Whorsnest being little more than a boil on its ever-widening,

topographical derriere. Who knows? The conception was ancient, and all the philosophers and magicians adhered to it. So, unless our narrative leads us to think otherwise, let's adhere to it to as well, and be thankful we follow our heroes away from Whorsnest, rather than towards it.

As for Whorsnest: It is a mad city of prisoners and wardens, the difference between them being nothing more than the severity of their madness. Some reveled in the chaos of the inescapable place. Others endured tortured lives there, reflected in the colossal screaming face of brick and metal that rose above its rooftops and towers. Anything human born within Whorsnest was doomed to stay there. Would-be escapees burst into colorful clouds of exploded corporality upon breaching the borders of the cursed place. There were tales of exceptions, who escaped the city and got out alive. But these were only legends, the stuff of children's stories and fantastic novels.

Likewise, it was impossible for a human mortal to enter Whorsnest. Doing so would be the equivalent of entering an inferno. The flesh would burn from one's bones if one just barely approached its borders.

Miles beneath Whorsnest, was the labyrinth of ancient plumbing that led to the sewers, where the crocodilians fought their ceaseless, senseless war.

Lower still was the swirling fog of the DreamSuck, where the nightmares and fevered ambitions of the Sourceworld were said to

swirl in fitful fragments. There were those that thought the dreams of people in the Periphery swirled in the DreamSuck as well.

Some thought the DreamSuck was where those mysterious desert radio stations trawled for signals, which they broadcast, for unknown purposes, over the dunes. No one knew for sure where the radio stations got their signals. But what *was* certain was that the worst of what floated in the DreamSuck, the real psychic garbage in it, was pulled up through those miles of rusted pipes and twisted plumbing under Whorsnest, to feed the crazed city and be the very engine of its madness.

The temperature was rising steadily as the three travelers headed deeper into the desert. The desert was not a comfortable place for a crocodilian. Unlike the sponges, Cassius Maigraive could not internally generate moisture. Dry by nature, the crocodilian's slow metabolism dictated a close proximity to bodies of water.

Thus it was that Val observed, many times, Maigraive strip down to the waist and lean back far into the moist flesh of the Sponges. He sunk into their wetness, soaking up what was not water, but did contain a good deal of it. Val realized that this was, perhaps, why Vaughn Earl-Royal had chosen the exotic mounts for their trip into the desert.

This practice of Maigraive's also afforded Val the opportunity to see, firsthand, the legacy of Maigraive's long years in the sewers. The tough, scaly skin to either side of his abdomen had been clawed into jagged troughs of torn flesh.

“A soldier’s medals!” Maigraive cried good naturedly, when he noticed Val looking.

The appeal of the desert, for Val, had always been the mysterious radio stations. In the desert, Val was able to pick up their sporadic but fascinating transmissions. But while in the company of his companions, this would not be possible. Listening to the revenant broadcasts was a solitary art. Perhaps it was faulty reception produced by a group of companions, as opposed to just one, that made radio reception impossible among groups or even duos. In any case, one could only hear the stations when alone.

The curious thing was that it was also evident independent listeners heard the same things. This was borne out by the messages and listeners’ logs people left on the boards that Val copied things down from. He saw recurring phrases and matching lines from songs travelers had heard. The radio signals were not merely the private products of a single mind, unheard by anyone but the one who heard them in their solitude.

A physical device — a radio — helped travelers tune in the stations. Val carried several small radios with him at all times. But the receiving mechanism for radio transmissions in the desert was actually the listener’s mind. The radio itself was more a way of focusing the listener on the *idea* of receiving the radio signals. The physical radios had no components that would actually make them work in terms of the ‘real world.’ It was similar to the horseless carriages one saw from time to time in the cities. The idea of them had been pulled from the Sourceworld, far in advance of any

mechanical knowledge of how to make a four-wheeled contraption move without an animal pulling it. But run they did, if the driver had enough psychic gumption to turn their wheels. Some contained faux engines, but these rarely had moving parts, or any practical connection to the rest of the vehicle.

Vaughn Earl-Royal, his sponge gliding along on the fizzling spume from its underbelly, was riding slightly ahead of the other two.

He consulted the map. He folded it after a few moments study, but not to put it away. Maps that addressed the shifting topography of A.F.O.M. regions required folding to be read correctly. It was an art in itself to read such maps. The skill demanded of a mapmaker was considerable, and required unbelievable amounts of calculation and planning. The reading of a finished map demanded nearly as much skill. It demanded a sort of cartographical origami on the part of the reader; folding the map precisely, then holding it up to the light so that the folded sections were illuminated, overlapped, in new, layered arrangements.

Vaughn Earl-Royal could have provided a copy of the map to Val and Cassius, but it would have been quite useless to them, once they'd entered the A.F.O.M.

Vaughn Earl-Royal held the map up high so that the sun's rays poured through it. He was not particularly dressed for desert travel. His long-sleeved, royal blue tunic blazed in the light and the gold brocade of its cuffs sparkled. His cape was more decorative than

practical: too light to provide warmth in the cold desert nights, and too flimsy to provide any shade during the day.

It was to be expected, thought Val. No comforts were worth paying the price of being unfashionable to Vaughn Earl-Royal.

When traveling A.F.O.M., the traveler had not left the Periphery for another place or dimension. They were only traveling a thin, barely accessible aspect of the ordinary world. It was a change of *perspective*. Thus, they saw recognizable features of their world that any ordinary traveler might see.

For example: “Look, gentlemen!” Earl-Royal said, pointing south. “See those glimmers at the horizon, extending up to the sky?”

They looked and caught the distant sparkles.

“The Vertical Sea,” Vaughn Earl-Royal announced. They were a great distance from it, but the Vertical Sea was discernible from their position. An ocean at a 90-degree angle to the regular world, tipped sideways, yet keeping its blue waters, rather than spilling them, as a waterfall would. Val hoped their expedition would take them closer to it, but the Pale Ontologist said no, they were heading in another direction. “Another time, perhaps.”

Traveling the A.F.O.M. was to step into a complex network of invisible gears and trajectories that moved time around as well as places. Both Time and Space traveled in interlocking orbits, beyond the comprehension of most humans, but supposedly within the grasp of some of the many non-human creatures that lived in the Periphery. The maps that Val bought as often as he could while traveling could be traced back to non-human hands, if they made

mention of the A.F.O.M. The regular dimensions of the Periphery were always changing too, and Time could never be counted on to behave. But an A.F.O.M. expedition was a whole other level.

Traveling A.F.O.M. had the benefit of releasing travelers from the restricting gravity of normal men and women. It produced a stage of sorts where uncommon acts could be performed. It contained the routes and roadways of magicians, and those who sought fantastic returns on their endeavors.

The A.F.O.M. — an acronym for “*Away From Other Men*” — had a built-in resistance to travelers crossing paths. Two parties might explore the same small area of an A.F.O.M. territory for months, and never even catch sight of each other. In this way, it was a very safe area to explore, as far as worries about danger or interference from others. In the same way however, it was unlucky to need assistance if one ran into trouble in an A.F.O.M. territory. If lost, no one would ever find you. If injured, no Good Samaritan would come to your aid.

Not many maps detailed A.F.O.M. topography. Some indicated entrance and exit points in relation to normal Peripheral locations. Most didn’t acknowledge A.F.O.M. directions at all. Vaughn Earl-Royal must have spent a great deal for these maps he had, and used his connections to find cartographers who could make them. Their calculations might not be valid for more than a few months, but it was necessary to engage in the sort of travel they had in mind. The fact was that every human born in the periphery was wired for A.F.O.M. travel. But it was a certain skill, a certain

attention that only a small number of humans would ever achieve. It demanded practice and a great assertion of the will to do it. Both Val and Vaughn had developed that skill. These are uncommon men who we're following vicariously here.

Maigraive, a crocodilian, was not wired for the A.F.O.M., but was being carried there by the attentions of Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal. He was there by virtue of his connection to them. Cut off from them, he would find himself alone, perhaps confused, in the day-to-day sands of the Periphery. He would be intact, unharmed. But the memory of his A.F.O.M. time with them would be at best like a dream to him, and he would soon forget whatever he did there. The same in fact would happen to Val and Vaughn, if they returned to the regular topography of the Periphery in any way other than a bona fide exit point. This was the great value of the maps.

Inside the mental dashboard of Val's mind, the A.F.O.M. was like a lit-up zodiac of lines and directions.

They were traveling in a place of red rocks, and strangely shaped hills and trenches. Over their heads, bizarrely shaped sandstone formations, sculpted by the winds, rose tall. These hoodoos were the colors of scarlet, of rust, of bleached white earth, and smoky crimson. They passed the man-made columns of the Three Crones, their ancient faces sculpted by men centuries before. They followed the custom of breaking three bottles of good wine at the base of the giant sisters as they passed.

By nightfall, they had left the regular world, and were deep into the A.F.O.M. They sat around a small fire, made from kindling Vaughn Earl-Royal had gathered in the mountains. The sponges brayed and murmured quietly.

Maigraive produced a small book from the pocket of his suit coat. “I’ve been enjoying your “Endlight Companion,” Val. I picked a copy up in Barrelslee. Excellent reading!”

Val felt that flush of satisfaction and embarrassment he experienced whenever someone said they’d read his book.

“I’m glad you like it, Cassius.”

“I do. Its “companionship” is not as gratifying as that of the author’s in person, but it is very entertaining. Perhaps I can ask you about something that puzzles me, though ... about authorship in general. I fully understand the pleasure of reading a book. But what pleasure does one get from writing one?”

Val considered. “I suppose it might be similar to the pleasure you get from telling your jokes, or inflicting those awful puns of yours on the unsuspecting.”

Maigraive chuckled. “Still, jokes and puns flow easily from the mind, and roll even easier off the tongue. A book, I imagine, is hard work.”

That is true, thought Val, and he wondered if defining the motivations to write one might be hard work as well. He thought for a moment. Then he said: “A good book almost demands to be written. It sits in one, nagging, filling one’s brain with unasked for sentences and phrases. They fill the head. A book is constantly inside the author, just behind the eyes — processing and reshaping every experience into prose. The book becomes a vague but demanding puzzle that the author becomes obsessed with solving.”

The crocodilian nodded. Val had his full attention. “It is, however, more than that. It is a by-product of the true excitement of life that it is the author’s privilege to feel. It is the spilling over of lived experience into shared experience, driven by the sheer generosity of life. The electricity of it!”

Maigraive nodded slowly. He’d never considered life a privilege, or contemplated the ‘electricity’ of it, before. Certainly, he had enjoyed the earthy pleasures he found in the Periphery, after emerging from the sewers. But he had never stopped thinking of “life” — when he thought about it at all — as anything but a struggle for survival.

As Val finished his explanation, Cassius Maigraive felt again that unexpected twang of friendship that he'd only experienced for a few people since joining the surface dwellers. He felt it for Vaughn Earl-Royal. But what he felt for Val, this openhearted, worried young man, so full of zeal for the "electricity" of his existence, went deeper.

It was notable that he felt friendship for anyone at all. Affection, love, camaraderie — these were not part of the crocodilian world. The crocodile soldiers fought for themselves and themselves only, not out of devotion to anyone. It was just in them to fight, and fight they did. True, they spent their years of combat alternately killing and entertaining each other. Packed mercilessly tight in the tunnels, whole years could pass before they could effectively bite or claw or strangle soldiers only inches away from them. And they did get to know each other, a bit. During these times of stalemate, they told stories, and traded jokes, and made their awful puns.

It was only in retrospect now, in retirement, that Maigraive realized that none of it had been the equivalent of true discourse here on the surface. It was the clanging together of empty cans; it was the hollow bumpings of boats tied to the dock. It was not communication. No crocodilian ever got delight or satisfaction from the telling of a tale to another, or the landing of a successful bon mot. No, they only lived for the dim flash of sensation they felt when spoken to. Their talk in the sewers did not inspire thought or soothe real curiosity; it only filled the tiny interstices between them in those soldier-packed tunnels, and kept them alive in the crudest of ways. And no friendships were made. A crocodilian might trade stories with another soldier for years, only to claw that companion's eye out the second there was an opening, caused by a shift of a scaly limb, or the sudden devouring of an unseen enemy, somewhere above or below them.

It was only in the dimly remembered fog of old age that a crocodilian began to think its thoughts, rather than merely experience them. In that dreamlike, irresistible climb that slowly replaced the endless war they were born into, they would slide their way upward, confronted by the thoughts and ideas they had absorbed and regurgitated through the bloody decades below, and become the creatures that broke through into the surface world as sentient beings.

It was always Whorsnest these warriors came up in. And most of them stayed there. They replaced the madness of the world below with the madness of the Screaming City above, feeling at home with its violence and its byzantine nest of hostile intrigues. But Maigraive had not found his place there. Though he was uncomfortable, too, among these smooth-skinned denizens of the Periphery, he felt more compatible with them than the damned souls of Whorsnest. Unlike a human being, he could leave the place, without dying and blowing away on the winds outside it.

And now, here he was, traveling with two men he could consider friends, and one who in particular he felt a marked dedication to. For him, it was the strangest part of their expedition.

It is doubtful that Val grasped the significance, and novelty, of the retired crocodilian's affection. As he expounded on the motives for writing books, in the back of his mind, Val had been wondering where Vaughn Earl-Royal was. Each of them had taken turns wandering off during the trip for moments of privacy. But Earl-Royal had been gone for some time, and Val had started to feel uneasy about it.

He left Maigraive and walked alone beneath the slow, distorted movements of the Fighters in the Night Sky. They swirled and kicked lazily above him. Their movements were different when viewed from the A.F.O.M.

Val, Cassius and Vaughn Earl-Royal had entered a territory of deep sandstone trenches. They had guided the snails through passages deeper than the height of the sponges, and at times, just barely as wide. It made it impossible to see very far in any direction, and Val felt claustrophobic and uncomfortable. Finding Earl-Royal should have been easy; he wouldn't have gone far. But the depth and twist of the trenches made it into a puzzle. He called out for him several times and got no answer. Could Vaughn be lost? He doubted it. Earl-Royal had been traveling the deserts and the A.F.O.M. since he was a boy. It was hard to imagine him losing his way, even in a landscape such as this.

Then, turning a corner, Val came upon a strange and disturbing scene. At first he saw only Vaughn Earl-Royal, seated awkwardly on a large stone. But there was something else too, hard to lay eyes upon and harder to register in the mind.

Crouching in front of Vaughn Earl-Royal was a dark, humanoid shape, a foot or two taller than a man. It was bonier than a man, too, and its limbs were crooked and long. Val recognized the dim, patchy texture of the phantom right away — it was like that of the sleepwalkers he'd seen in the city with Maigraive. But what sort of dreamer was this? Clearly, it was not human.

Earl-Royal, sitting on the stone, was leaning back against the wall of the stony chasm. His eyes were open, but dull. His expression betrayed no emotion. Nor did he register any recognition of Val when he appeared behind the grotesque sleepwalker.

The sleepwalker heard him, though, or at least it sensed his presence. It spun backwards to face him with none of the listless demeanor of the human sleepwalkers he'd seen in Barrelslee. Its face was a jagged vacuum of open mouth and tormented shadow. There was no mistaking its malevolence. Unlike the naked sleepwalkers Maigraive had stalked in Barrelslee, Val had the impression that this sleepwalker wore ash-colored robes, and that its long arms were covered with coarse hair. But the most startling difference between this sleepwalker and the others was that it was carrying a longsword.

Val stepped back, making an embarrassing sort of '*glurk*' sound from the base of his throat. He grabbed at the hilt of the sword Earl-Royal insisted he wear, but he failed to slide it out of its sheath before the creature was upon him, with its own weapon.

It would have sliced him in two, if not for Maigraive. Maigraive sprang from the narrow mouth of the trench's entrance, and landed between Val and the sleepwalker. Before his booted feet had fully hit the dry earth, Maigraive swung his own sword in a fearsome sidelong arc that decapitated the menacing creature.

Val watched as Maigraive finished the kill in the same manner he'd taken out the human sleepwalkers: hack, hack, chop, chop. Vaughn Earl-Royal sat on the rock the whole time, dazed and indifferent to the carnage. Maigraive turned to Val, covered in grey blood, once the ruined carcass began to disintegrate. Val had recovered his composure.

"What in hell do you suppose *that* was?" he breathed.

"Perhaps the Ontologist can help with that," Maigraive proposed.

"We may have to help him first," Val said. "Look at him. Like he's in a trance."

They were already walking over to him, calling his name. "Ontologist, what's wrong with you?" "Are you hurt, man?"

They found Earl-Royal intact, but they had to shake him several times before he snapped out of whatever spell he was under.

The three companions sat in silence as Vaughn Earl-Royal collected himself. But after some time, Maigraive demanded an explanation.

"Ontologist, what is going on here? This expedition, and now things that preceded it, as I think further -- I feel Val and I have been duped."

"Indeed you have, and I apologize," Earl-Royal replied. "For I have indeed been misleading you from the start. It was not my wish to do so. The true architect of this expedition, and of my betrayal of my two closest friends, was that inky parasite you just killed. And congratulations on doing so, for it has been my hope all along, Maigraive, that either you or Val would do it. For I was utterly helpless in the demon's grip."

"A demon had hold of you?"

"Demon?" Val said. "A demon of what sort?" For there were many types of demons in the Periphery.

The Ontologist looked up finally and locked eyes with Endlight. "The sort that escapes from Whorsnest."

"Whorsnest?" the crocodile said. "Impossible! There's no leaving Whorsnest, even for the most powerful devil that dwells there! You know that!"

Val nodded. "It is the rule, Vaughn."

"It has been the rule," Earl-Royal admitted. "But of late there have been exceptions to that rule."

"You're saying that you were possessed by a demon from Whorsnest? One that dictated your arranging this expedition."

"That is exactly what I am saying."

Maigraive said: "When I cut that thing down ... I was reminded immediately of those sleepwalkers you set me on back in Barrelee. This 'demon' of yours was obviously more vital than those shady wretches I hunted for sport those nights ... but it had a certain smell to it, and it was just like the smell of those sleepwalkers."

"It's the stink of Whorsnest."

"The sleepwalkers also escaped from Whorsnest."

"They did not escape. They were launched here against their will. The most powerful demons of Whorsnest have been developing a way to escape the city and influence events in the outside world. They used the tortured, lesser souls of Barrelslee as test subjects, while they developed an experimental mechanism for launching the consciousness of demons beyond the walls of Whorsnest. The sleepwalkers you killed suffered as much in our world as they did in their own. You saw them: pathetic, half-formed, creatures. They couldn't take the intensity of the displacement..

When the demon had of hold me, I was privy to some of its thoughts and its knowledge of things. I learned of this program they were involved in. I learned that the presence of the sleepwalkers was small in comparison to what the higher demons could do with it, but the corrosive effect of their collective presence in the Periphery would gradually deteriorate the barrier between their realm and our own.

But their goal is making the Periphery accessible to the most powerful demons of Whorsnest. This is what they are working toward. For now, they have the ability to hide in human hosts in the Periphery, using them as an anchor for their manifestation until they are able to conduct themselves as independent entities.

Earl-Royal was looking like himself again. He leaned forward conspiratorially, as he did when he had a tale to tell.

"I sat in the Musetoreum, very late one night, poring over documents I'd acquired after a long search. The documents had to do with the Desert Mummies. One section had a partial list of films made by the Mummies. Apparently, an entire series of short films had been made about Pin-Uthra and his remarkable exodus from the pestilent city. There was a list naming the title of each installment in the series. I was enthralled.

Then there was a sudden burst of heat in the room, followed by an equally sudden, death-like, chill. I looked up from my documents, and saw the demon sleepwalker, standing on the other side of my worktable. It said nothing. It was mostly made of shadow, but its presence was unmistakable.

It had a sword — a black, oily-looking longsword. Before I could move, the demon ran me through with it, pinning me to the back of my chair. As it withdrew the blade, I remained fully conscious and fully stuck to the chair, for while it appeared ghostly, the creature's sword was as physical as anything else in the room. Then the demon began whacking away at me with the freed blade, in the same manner that I instructed you to whack away at the sleepwalkers in Barrelslee, Maigraive.

I believe this over-the-top dismembering is a sort of compensation for the murderous act being done on an astral, rather than physical, plane. An astral form must try harder to destroy a physical one. At any rate, the demon chopped me into jelly. But aside from the initial shock, I felt no real pain, and my thoughts remained clear and consistent. I remained in my chair, full in body and mind. My dismemberment, though, took some time, and I became, in fact, a little bored by the process, before it was completed to the demon's satisfaction."

"At this point, I either fell asleep, or lost consciousness by some other means. During this time, I am convinced the demon familiarized itself with me in both body and mind, and installed itself at the back of my consciousness. In its own body, in the infernal, urban pustule that is Whorsnest, the demon was sleeping as it took me. When the demon woke, I was once again — superficially — my normal self. But the demon sleepwalker continued to guide my actions, and somehow it restricted me from doing anything to remedy my situation, or tell anyone about it.

In the weeks that followed, it laid the groundwork for this very expedition. It led me to gather information in the right places. It funneled voices from unrevealed sources into my head. Finally, it dictated the map we have followed since we left Barrelslee.

The sleepwalker has hung behind me all this time, perverting actions I would normally have enjoyed, by making them the fulfillment of desires of its own. When the demon sleeps, it is strongest in my consciousness. Physically, it is trapped in Whorsnest, as has always been the rule. Astrally, as a ‘sleepwalker,’ it cannot operate on its own, away from its wretched home in Whorsnest. That was the reason for my possession.

The goal of our expedition is as I told you — with one exception. You see, Pin-Uthra meant as much to the demon that possessed me as it does to me, in my unmolested frame of mind — The story of Pin-Uthra, and his miraculous escape! The goal of the expedition coincided with my own interest, but it was the demon that truly initiated this quest. It was my own passion for the story of Pin-Uthra that led it to me, and allowed it to so effectively take control of my mind.

Val, you discovered the creature beginning its grisly work of ‘killing’ me for the umpteenth time since it appeared in my study at the Musetoreum. It did this to cement its hold on me, as we traveled even further from Whorsnest, its center of influence. Maigraive killed the creature, as I hoped one of you would, if you accompanied me into the wilderness. My thanks, for sniffing out its presence and neutralizing the thing.”

“You could not tell of your possession, but you were hoping, as you invited us, that we would figure out your predicament during the expedition, and remedy the situation,” Val said.

“Yes,” the Ontologist confirmed. “You and Maigraive are the most intrepid and reliable of all my friends. I was confident that you could save me.”

The sleepwalking demon had overestimated its ability to possess Earl-Royal as the journey took them farther and farther from Whorsnest. It had allowed Earl-Royal to assemble a team for the expedition, for the demon realized that it was a task for more than one man. It did not guess the reason behind Earl-Royal’s confidence in the two friends he had chosen, that they would see through Earl-Royal’s deception and realize the true plot.

Now, the demon was vanquished. But the map, transcribed by Earl-Royal during his possession, by dictation of the demon, still led to the goal that the Pale Ontologist had described from the beginning. They could still find the spheres, and claim them for themselves (well, mostly for the Ontologist, who was the big Pin-Uthra fan). It was the Ontologist, naturally, who suggested they continue the expedition and do just that.

Maigraive frowned. “Even if it’s as you say, and a dreaming demon found its way out of Whorsnest ... Why would it be so interested in props from an ancient motion picture serial.”

“The thing is, Maigraive, the spheres are not props. They are the actual things themselves!”

“What?” said Maigraive. “The “actual balls” of Pin-Uthra? I thought Pin-Uthra was merely a legend! A mythical person ... like Pinapplio.”

The Pale Ontologist shook his head. “I was never certain myself. Until that demon sleepwalker possessed me. Pin-Uthra was real, and so were the magic spheres he used during his exodus! That’s what that demon was after!

“And, if they did indeed belong to a wizard like Pin-Uthra, they are a relic of truly ancient magic, which everyone agreed was prodigious, compared to our own. Who knows what we can do, if we retrieve them?”

III

The Balls of Pin-Uthra

“So, just how big are this wizard’s balls?” Maigraive asked cheerfully.

Val groaned. This had to be the hundredth “balls” double entendre he had heard in the last two days.

“I’m serious, Ontologist,” Maigraive insisted. “There are only three of us, and you say the wizard’s balls are hidden in a system of subterranean tunnels. How will we retrieve them, if they weigh, say, hundreds of pounds?”

“We’re quite prepared, Maigraive,” answered the Pale Ontologist. “I’ve brought harnesses and pulleys, if we need them. And the sponges are incredibly strong. But, actually — I know this from the recollected thoughts of my unwanted guest — they are thought to weigh less than a soap bubble.”

“Preposterous!” Maigraive exclaimed.

“That’s sorcery for you,” Earl-Royal answered.

“But you’ve speculated they are containers,” the crocodilian continued. “What could they contain, and yet remain so light?”

“Spells, I’m thinking.”

"More nonsense. If we’re successful, we’ll find some pretty new exhibits for your Musetoreum. At best."

The following days were filled with “balls” jokes from Maigraive. Val got tired of them right away, which only seemed to make them more fun for Maigraive.

But eventually they and all his other puns and jokes stopped. It was hot, and growing hotter as they neared their destination.

“Are you alright, Cassius?” Val called over from his sponge.

“Earl-Royal might have told us he was leading us into an inferno when he proposed this adventure,” Maigraive answered.

At this point in the journey, none of the three were feeling very well. Vaughn Earl-Royal was still drained from his recent possession by a sleepwalking demon. And Val’s tinnitus had grown more loud and distracting than ever. He was nearly deaf in the right ear, and his sense of balance was off.

But the crocodilian was dangerously dry.

They persevered. Vaughn Earl-Royal’s map showed that they were close to their destination. After another day of riding, they could see the weirdly formed mountain mass they’d come for.

“There are tunnels beneath those mountains, and in those tunnels are the balls of Pin-Uthra,” the Pale Ontologist announced. Val braced himself for another ‘balls’ joke from Maigraive. But none came.

Maigraive looked very bad. His skin, always crusty, had ossified to the point where it seemed he might crumble. Stripped down to the waist, he maintained his place on the high saddle with difficulty.

“Perhaps we should set up camp here and rest before we continue,” Val suggested.

“Nonsense,” the crocodilian huffed. “At the tunnels there will be shade. I’d rather revive myself there than here, in this infernal, cloudless heat.”

So it was. They pressed on. Vaughn Earl-Royal’s map proved reliable. Between it and his three-faced variable compass, they found the opening to the tunnels late in the day.

Maigraive slid painfully down from the sponge. Even the sponge was dry, in its upper body.

But its lower flanks were still wet from the liquid spume it propelled itself over the desert sand with.

Maigraive took a big gulp of air and sank backwards into the animal. Liquid oozed out around the heavy crocodilian, but not as much as had done earlier, at the beginning of their quest.

“Let’s gather the sponges around Cassius”, Val said.

“Excellent idea,” the Ontologist agreed. They tied the animals close together, sandwiching Maigraive between their moist, massive sides. Maigraive nodded vaguely, and closed his eyes. He became quite still.

“Alright, then. Val, Maigraive’s in bad shape. I hadn’t counted on things getting so hot. I may have asked too much of him. But I’m thinking — if *you’re* up to it — you and I can fetch the spheres from the tunnels. The tunnels are vast and confusing, but the spheres are not too far inside them. We can let Maigraive recuperate here, and have them already hitched up to the sponges when he’s ready to travel again.”

It seemed like a reasonable plan. They had no reason to expect resistance in the tunnels — they hadn't seen another living thing in the last two days, and the map indicated no settlements or occupations anywhere in the area. They were in a true no-man's-land, and as far as they knew that negation applied to other creatures as well. Besides, in his present condition, Maigraive would be less help than hindrance if they had to defend themselves.

They would have to hope that Vaughn Earl-Royal's certainty that, for all their size, the spheres were incredibly light, was correct. "Remember the poster you saw at my shop?" Earl-Royal had said to Val. "The spheres are shown as light enough to be pushed along by a pack of dogs."

"They may not have been ordinary dogs," Val cautioned. (And he was pretty sure the "dogs" part of the story was apocryphal.)

"You worry too much! And, if our treasure is indeed too cumbersome to move once we find it, we will abandon the plan and come back later with the sponges, and the harnesses I've designed to pull the balls back with."

Val nodded. He imagined that it would come to exactly that, especially since they were unsure of exactly how many of the spherical containers there were. (Val had fallen into the habit of calling them 'spherical containers', to discourage more tiresome wordplay from Maigraive.) But the possibility of finding the spherical containers while his suffering friend rested seemed worth pursuing. Val himself wasn't tired, although he did have to fight off a sudden wave of dizziness when he dismounted from his sponge.

They told their intention to the crocodilian. He nodded and waved them away, half-sleeping in the seeping, frothy liquid pooling between the bodies of the gathered sponges.

Leaving Maigraive and the sponges inside the wide mouth of the cave, Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal headed into its tunneled insides. The antechamber tapered into one small tunnel as predicted by the map. Their lanterns were unnecessary as they continued deeper, due to a slight phosphorescence of the tunnel walls.

They came to an inner chamber where the ceiling grew nearer but the tunnel expanded outward on either side, as if they had been traveling down the stem of the letter "I" and had hit the horizontal crux. The tunnel wall in front of them was perforated by holes which were perhaps three times the size of a man. They counted ten of the holes, which were the mouths of other tunnels, again as predicted by the map. They located the tunnel they should go through, and found its walls were full of more holes, more tunnels. They were certain the other tunnels looked much the same way.

Without the map, they could have been lost forever in this maze. They pressed on in the gloom. The ceiling and floor of the tunnel they were in followed the shape of its circular entrance, so they walked not on a flat surface but a curved one. The ceiling above them mirrored the curve of the stony floor. As

they walked, the circular tunnel entrances they passed lost all sense of perspective in the gloom, and they seemed to be walking in a grey landscape of circles. The curved floor made it hard to walk with certainty, and Val found his tinnitus starting to roar, his head starting to spin.

Vaughn Earl-Royal was counting the tunnel entrances staring hard at the map. Val said: “This is more disorienting than anticipated, don't you think? Perhaps we should rejoin Maigraive before we get in too deep.”

“Bear up, man. Yes, it's awful in here, but we haven't far to go. These tunnels are the shortest leg of our trip. Once Pin-Uthra had made the Periphery, and continued ‘past’ it into A.F.O.M. territory, he didn't need to hide his treasure too carefully. It was well beyond the reach of those he left behind in Whorsnest.”

Vaughn Earl-Royal was walking faster than Val cared for, and making quick decisions. Right, left, right again. Some of the tubes — for that is most like what they were now — were only ten or fifteen feet long, some twisted along further, and took turns that led them up, then down again.

“But this place!” Val insisted, rather desperately. “It's enough to drive one mad!”

“Of course! A fitting place for a wizard to store his valuables! Although I daresay the intricacies of this place are not the work of sorcery. Rather, that of parasites. Huge, slug-like animals, that chewed these tunnels out of the rock!”

“Parasites?”

“Yes! But don't worry, my friend! They are long extinct. We might thank them, though. The walls owe their phosphorescence to the slime of these creatures' bodies. The traces of them, sliding their big, gelatinous bodies through the spaces their gnawing made in the stone!”

Vaughn Earl-Royal's voice had taken on a wild, buzzing tone. Or was it Val's ears that made it seem so?

“I beg of you, Vaughn. A moment's pause ...”

“You're made of heartier stock than this, Val! Let's press on a bit further! Tally Ho!”

“Vaughn, it's ... the vertigo. My ears ... An attack ...”

It was true. Val's vision was becoming a sea of spinning circles. Vaughn Earl-Royal was farther ahead now. To the left. Or, was it the right —

“Buck up, man! Concentrate!” Vaughn's voice was far off and tinny.

The circles spun faster. Val lost his footing and stumbled forward. Was Vaughn Earl-Royal's passion to find these treasure so great, to be so uncharacteristically blind to his distress?

“Please, Vaughn, I can't continue ...”

The floor, or was it the ceiling? swung upward at him. He felt his body hit hard against stone. Another spin.

“Stop,” he gasped, tucking his face in his crooked arm. The spinning didn’t stop when he closed his eyes. The spinning was inside him. He was hot, and needing to vomit. He called again for Earl-Royal, but there was no reply. He heard only the roar of his tinnitus. Had Vaughn Earl-Royal left him here?

He’d been abandoned. It almost didn’t matter. He only wanted to be still, and try to separate himself from the spinning. He pretended he was just a small still thing, watching the spinning from afar. It wasn’t working. He rotated his hand in a vague, helpless gesture.

An unfortunate effect of prolonged vertigo is it makes your thoughts seem to spin, too. Parasites, phosphorescent slime ... it was impossible to keep in mental focus, all was a nauseating swirl of chopped up thoughts and images.

He wanted to be no one, so no one would be there to spin. He wanted to escape the spinning and fall asleep, and eventually he did.

In his troubled sleep, Val saw the Periphery from above, he soared above the dunes and great expanses of it. He saw steep spires rising from the sand: they were radio towers. Spidery constructions reaching up to the sky, as if to scratch the bottom of the Elevated Planes, which floated high above the Periphery. The strange, spiraling towers snagged at a turbulent sea of something, not made of matter, but not imagined either: radio waves.

He was not free of the spinning, though, even in these visions. He could not focus on what he saw. He searched for his own imaginary radio tower among these steely giants of cable and wire. And he glimpsed, far below the others, a struggling vertical thread of steel; his imagined tower. He felt its straining, its faltering wish to broadcast ... But from it, came only the familiar, inescapable HISS ...

He tried to stand, and fell back immediately against the hard, luminous wall of the tunnel. His sense of balance had not returned. He stepped forward, and things spun harder. He braced himself once more against the wall. How could he escape this place, when he could not even walk?

He would have to wait until the vertigo passed. But the vertigo took hours, sometimes to go away. For now, Vaughn Earl-Royal’s treachery was not something he could concentrate on. There was only the nausea.

He started to slide to the floor of the tunnel.

It was then that a remarkable thing happened. Val sensed another presence in the gloom. He stepped forward (or did he, rather, begin to faint?) It didn’t matter; he did not fall.

There was something solid in front of him. He opened his eyes, for he had been squinting, in an attempt to stop the spinning. He saw diamond-patterned cloth, and gold braided tassels, and colors that would have blaze if they were seen in the sunlight, rather than a subterranean maze glowing with the nearly

extinguished slime of ancient slugs. He recognized the decorated fabric immediately. He saw a stylized equine neck and head to one side, and a thick tail of richly-wove yarn at the other.

It was the Rig, which had been carried, silent and unused, throughout their expedition, fastened to the side of Val Endlight's sponge. The Rig hovered now in the still air, its unoccupied gown several inches above the tunnel's floor.

As Maigraive had guessed when he first met Val, the Rig and its relationship with Val was a magical sort of affair. This was, however, a magic that Val had not experienced before. But he chose not to question the Rig's inexplicable presence here in the tunnel. He would examine that later, if he survived this wicked turn of events. He made, with some effort, the maneuvers required to strap himself into his unusual steed, and felt steadied somewhat once he had. He sank into its mock-saddle and abandoned the concentration it took to stand on his own.

Val willed the Rig to turn and move forward, and immediately it did. The toes of Val's boots skimmed over the smooth floor of the tunnel. The tube he was in was a long one and he was fairly certain that he had entered it from the direction the Rig was now carrying him in. But circular entrances soon appeared to the right and left of him. Which of them had he and Vaughn Earl-Royal used? He had no idea. He took his best guess, and the Rig followed his every decision, carrying him along. But there was no denying that he was hopelessly lost, and moving in any one direction was just as useful (or, useless) as moving in any other. He continued on, though, making marks on the tunnel walls with his unsheathed sword so he would know if was going in circles. Weak and nauseous, he gave in to despair, as the noise in his ears grew louder.

Then the noise broke suddenly. The sudden stop of the tinnitus made him feel a huge open room had opened up in his head. Then there was a crackle, a burst of static, and the hiss was back again, but quieter.

Over the hiss, he heard a woman's voice.

"You've gone too far down this tunnel. Turn back, and take the first opening on the right."

"Who is this?" Val said weakly. There was no answer.

It didn't really matter. He knew who it was.

He willed the Rig to follow the instruction. They turned around, until they reached the next tunnel branching off from the one they were in.

"Follow it to the end."

The Rig followed the instruction without Val consciously willing it to. At the end of that tunnel was another circular portal, and the Rig carried him into it. It twisted round and round, till finally it broke off into three new tunnels.

"Take the one to the left."

The Rig glided abruptly to the left. They entered a narrower tunnel, glided 100 yards or so, then Val was startled when he realized that the tunnel was occupied.

“Maigraive!” he exclaimed, when he realized who it was.

“Delighted to see you, Val” Maigraive said in his low voice. “What a damned place this is!”

Maigraive looked rehydrated and good as new. “You came in here with no map?”

“A lot of good that map would have done me. All that figuring and folding! To hell with that.”

“How did you find me?”

“Never underestimate the olfactory prowess of the crocodilian snout!” Maigraive said with satisfaction, tapping his. “Although, to be honest, it only led me in your general direction. The way this place wraps around its own innards, we could be six feet away from each other and not realize it. Where’s the Ontologist?”

“He left me. Abandoned me, actually, as I was having an attack of my condition!”

“I’m not too surprised. Once I came back to my own senses, I realized this whole business about you two going into the tunnels without me was fishy. The Ontologist’s not himself, Val, we were wrong to think things were right with him after we killed that sleepwalker.”

Val nodded. He was feeling a little better. The crocodilian said: “We can try to find our way out of this place, or we can try to find Vaughn Earl-Royal again.” He paused, but knew Val’s answer without his saying so aloud. “Alright then, Endlight! Let’s carry on! I can smell his cologne, sure enough. But it’s a faint scent, and I fear he’s quite a ways deeper into this place ...”

“It’s alright, Cassius,” Val said.

“At the end of this tunnel, there are two branches. Follow the one to the left.” It was the woman’s voice addressing Val.

Maigraive heard nothing, but he noticed that Val seemed to be listening to something he himself could not hear.

“We go this way,” Val said, stepping forward. He realized when he took the first step that he was no longer wearing the Rig. But his balance was back, and he was feeling only a little bit wobbly. The voice in Val’s head continued to guide him.

The two headed deeper into the tunnels.

Val had guessed right away the source of Vaughn Earl-Royal’s treachery in the tunnels: he had not been completely emptied of his demons. The demon sleepwalker Maigraive killed was not the only one that had attached itself to Vaughn Earl-Royal. Earl-Royal’s abandonment of Val in the tunnels was not done through any choice of his own.

Indeed, there might have been some element of rebellion on his friend's part. For wouldn't it have been just as simple to kill Val, as to leave him alive?

Next to him, Maigraive stopped walking and said "Val, look —"

The tunnel they'd been walking through had opened up into a large, subterranean chamber. They were at the bottom of a cathedral-sized chasm. Its floor was filled with icy green water, its still surface broken here and there by imposing stalagmites and tall, weirdly shaped rocks.

In the water, and in places scattered around the dim shore of the underground lake were large, brightly decorated spheres. The balls of Pin-Uthra!

Their colors were vibrant, even in the gloom of the cavern. But, otherwise, they were exactly like the ones Val had seen in the crumbling, faded poster in Vaughn Earl-Royal's Musetoreum. The largest sphere was at least twice his own height.

"It was a big job the Ontologist planned for us, getting those to the surface, and back home. Do you really think they're light as air?"

"Maybe," Val whispered back. "But I wonder if, having found them, he'd still have to rely on earthly means to do it."

Val's head had cleared. Things were no longer spinning, and his balance felt certain.

But the voice of the woman was gone. The transmission had ended.

In his head, there was just dead air, and his normal, day-to-day tinnitus.

Later, if Val survives this chapter, he will form a detailed image of what he sees just fleetingly now.

He will remember seeing, through an aperture in the rock high above him, his friend Vaughn Earl-Royal in his royal blue cape with the high collar. He will remember that, in a departure from his usual posture, the jaunty Earl-Royal is barely staying on his feet. He will remember his face as pale and drained, though this will only be a detail that his imagination embellishes the memory with, as he is much too high above Val and Maigraive in the gloomy chamber for Val to really see this.

He will remember the unsettling sight of nine phantom shapes surrounding his friend, though it is impossible to count the number of the demons at this first sighting. He will remember that they look very much like the demon that had possessed Vaughn Earl-Royal in the desert, and like that demon, they are armed with long swords.

And finally he will remember the presence of a man he had never seen before, at least not in the flesh. A tall, gaunt figure in robes, who seems a strange combination of man, cat, and scarecrow. It is the wizard Val saw on the faded poster in Earl-Royal's Musetoreum. It was Pin-Uthra, who'd escaped Whorsnest long ago with those magic spheres they had come for.

These things will nest in Val's memory and stay there, more vividly than he sees them in actuality now. Now, he only registers the basic outline of the sighting, and his immediate understanding is that his friend is in the middle of a standoff between the wizard and the demons.

Val had freed his own sword from its sheath, and pointed the strange scene out to Maigraive. "Cassius, look! Vaughn Earl-Royal, surrounded by sleepwalkers!"

The crocodilian nodded, the yellow behind the dark pupils of his reptilian eyes glowing weirdly in the gloom. "The Ontologist had more of those things inside him than we thought."

Maigraive and Endlight needed to communicate no further. They charged as one to the aid of their friend.

There was a thin and steep ribbon of ascending stone leading from the low shore of the subterranean water up to the precipice where they could see the Ontologist and the demons.

Endlight and Maigraive charged for it.

The demon sleepwalkers were as surprised as Val and Maigraive to find the thousands-of-years-old wizard Pin-Uthra alive in the tunnels. Time played weird tricks in the Periphery, but none of them would have guessed Pin-Uthra could still be alive.

Pin-Uthra had thrown some sort of magic barrier around himself. It was too strong for the sleepwalking demons to penetrate. They would have gladly killed him on sight had they been able.

Val and Cassius had no magic barrier around them. When the man and the crocodile burst upon them from out of the depths, they raised their ghostly swords and flew at them.

A human and the crocodilian would be easily dealt with, compared to a wizard. The demons answered the ferocity of Val and Maigraive's attack with a ferocity of their own.

It has been asserted in this narrative that Vayle Endlight was no adventurer.

It is true that he gave a rather unimpressive account of himself, when he was attacked by the first of Vaughn Earl-Royal's demonic stowaways. The reader may also have guessed that Endlight had little love of violence. And, there was that observation about desert dwellers being pussies.

But any guess that Vayle Endlight lacked a good grasp of swordsmanship would be wrong.

He had never killed anyone. But in non-lethal competition, he was talented with a sword. (Why that was the case is for a story other than this one.)

Confronted by the phantoms in that chamber, newly emerged from his friend's unwilling sponsorship, Endlight needed no coaxing to slide his borrowed blade from its sheath and dig in. Maigraive was just as fast to attack, adding his reckless, brawling style of swordsmanship to Endlight's more cultivated and cunning approach.

They were two against nine, at first. Then Vaughn Earl-Royal shook off the last strands of the demons' influence from his newly unoccupied body and drew his own sword. And the three of them joined together against the Whorsnestians.

Grey demon blood was spilling and spraying all over the chamber. As Val's arm and clothing became covered with it, an uncharacteristic bloodlust came over him. He swung his sword with a wild enthusiasm worthy of Maigraive.

So far from their home, the sleepwalking demons were not as deadly as they would have been in Whorsnest. Still, there were nine of them. Our heroes did not fall, but the tide of the battle started to turn against them. Pin-Uthra, meanwhile, did not back away from the battle, nor did he join in. He observed, with those strange feline eyes of his, the battle between the men, the crocodilian, and the sleepwalkers.

But, when it was five demons against Val, Vaughn and Maigraive, the ancient wizard made a move. The three were having too many close calls, and the chamber was becoming noisy with the labored breathing. Plus, the demands of the battle and the close quarters it was being fought in did not allow for the mutilation of the fallen demons that was required to send them home to their dreaming bodies in Whorsnest; so the severed limbs and decapitated shadows, still wriggled on the floor and sought to trip and entangle the legs of Val and his companions.

At long last the wizard decided to help them. Pin-Uthra leaned back. He raised two of his arthritis-twisted fingers to his lips, and blew. A high shrieking whistle bounced off the cavern walls and rang throughout the tunnels.

None of the fighters took heed, or even noticed the sound, so caught up in the conflict were they. But those it was intended for heard the whistle, and in response to it there was a chilling rustle of feet, a ghostly, wolf-pack pattering of canine paws on hard stone.

Suddenly dogs as faded and charcoal-hued as the demonic swordsmen spilled into the chamber. They pounced, snarling, upon the fallen demons. They ripped their shadowy limbs to pieces, and flung chunks of grey flesh about them as they devoured the still-moving pieces.

The tide of the battle turned, and the remaining demons were vanquished. The dogs finished them off as Val, Vaughn Earl-Royal and Cassius Maigraive cut them down one by one.

These were the dogs, Val realized, depicted in the poster that hung in Vaughn Earl-Royal's office: gay and frolicking there, but vicious here, in their consumption of the demons.

With the sleepwalkers killed, and eaten by the ghostly dogs, old Pin-Uthra turned his attention to the newcomers. The grey dogs gathered round his feet and looked friendly again. The wizard did not.

He regarded the two men and the crocodilian with unconcealed disdain, but just a bit of icy curiosity. If Vaughn Earl-Royal and Pin-Uthra had exchanged any words before the arrival of Endlight and Maigraive, the two latecomers had no clue.

It was the wizard who broke the silence. “So after thousands of years, I lay eyes on men again.” He spoke more to himself than to the three travelers. “And what do they bring me? Ten of the demons I fought so hard to leave behind me, and a plot to steal what I have hidden from them for ages.”

Pin-Uthra looked remarkably like what the Desert Mummers had painted on their poster. He was quite tall and thin. He was thousands of years old, and he looked it. His skin was marked with deep lines and wrinkles, and there was a frailty about him that suggested his ornate robes might be the only thing holding him up.

They knew better than that, of course. It was magic that gave the wizard his bones — that lost, stygian magic which the Periphery had not known for ages.

“Great Pin-Uthra!” Vaughn Earl-Royal exclaimed, dramatically enough that both Val and Maigraive jumped a bit.

The fight had rejuvenated Earl-Royal: “It was not my intent to bring those demons to your door. They took advantage of my admiration for you, and pirated my mortal frame to lead them here. But they had no idea that you still lived. Nor did I! I can tell you of their shock, and the terror they felt, upon seeing you. I felt it too, before they left me. But now, however, as myself again, I feel only awe and delight! And a wish to help you, in whatever way I can, to make up for the demons I unwillingly carried to your door.”

“Magicians and their stilted speech,” Maigraive muttered.

Pin-Uthra eyed Vaughn Earl-Royal bitterly. “*You* would help *me*,” Pin-Uthra scoffed. “You, who, mere minutes ago, expelled my enemies like diarrhea at my feet!”

Vaughn Earl-Royal hesitated, but was not daunted. “Yes, but their plan was foiled, sir! By my two friends here, and, if I may say so, myself, at the very end,” the Pale Ontologist stammered. “True, I was coerced by demonic possession into bringing those creatures here. But I counted on my friends here to foil the plot, and, indeed they did,” Vaughn Earl-Royal said.

“Please,” Pin-Uthra said. “You brought demons to my doorstep after a thousand years of blissful solitude.”

“My sincerest apologies, Pin-Uthra! I would do whatever I can to make up for my offense. I offer any aid I might give to correct my mistake and earn your forgiveness. My friends as well!” (Maigraive and Val exchanged a look.) “And furthermore, I offer myself as an apprentice and assistant, if you will have me.”

The Wizard scowled at Earl-Royal. “I think not.”

“Because of you — *the three* of you —” Pin-Uthra said, “I must leave what has been a serviceable residence for a thousand years. I will twist these tunnels around me as I go, and I’ll wither every portal as I

pass through it, and I'll warp the dimensions of the Periphery itself in my wake, to assure myself that the likes of you will never track me down again."

The wizard turned away from them, and the shadowy dogs rose and turned with him. Through the aperture in the chamber wall, the three companions saw Pin-Uthra's balls quiver and move (nyuk nyuk), then begin to roll in the darkness. They disappeared, presumably rolling off to meet the wizard Pin-Uthra deeper in the tunnels.

One could say that the mood of our three heroes was subdued as they returned, empty-handed, from their expedition, except for the surprising cheerfulness of Vaughn Earl-Royal.

"Imagine!" he said gaily from the top of his lurching sponge. "We met the legendary wizard, Pin-Uthra!"

"What are you so happy about, Ontologist? He certainly had no use for *you*."

"Wizards are an ill-tempered lot," Earl-Royal explained. "If he'd *really* disliked me, he could have disintegrated me with an eye-twitch or a lifted finger. Don't laugh, his longevity alone attests to the potency of the old magic! If the stories of Pin-Uthra are true, and not the stuff of mere legend, think of what that says about the Universe! Its promises and potentials and —"

"It's dangers," Val finished for him.

Earl-Royal paid no heed.

"That bit about twisting the tunnels behind him and warping dimensions in his wake, so I could never find him again ... That's was nothing short of a challenge. He wants me to look for him. That was practically an invitation!"

"If you say so," Val replied.

"And, also, what a testament to the veracity of the films of the Desert Mummies this whole affair has been! Val, did you notice how accurately the poster in my study depicted Pin-Uthra? There's a connection between them and Pin-Uthra that goes beyond an historical appreciation. The magic spheres, the dogs ... they got it all right. It tells me their work was not based on supposition or fantasy, but real knowledge!" Maigraive had never seen the poster, but Val couldn't dispute that they had captured Pin-Uthra, and the dogs and the magical spheres, remarkably well.

Maigraive had heard enough about the Mummies. He asked Vaughn Earl-Royal if they could be certain no more demons would pop out of him.

"Absolutely!" the latter answered. "I am an archaeologist, not a clown carriage."

"It didn't seem like that back in the tunnels," Maigraive muttered. Earl-Royal chuckled.

Endlight had been concerned that Earl-Royal would be crestfallen after his dressing-down from the wizard. But he saw that his friend was in high spirits. He'd been dazzled by this unexpected first-hand encounter with what a day before had seemed only fantasy.

Endlight, too, was feeling dazzled. A direct contact with the woman in his dreams, and the first successful broadcast from his phantom limb radio station.

Maigraive seemed content enough, but it is hard to imagine him dazzled.

Val pictured the psychic radio tower he'd erected in his mind. It was silent. He heard only the never-ending broadcast of his tinnitus. *Hisssss*. But the tower stood perceptibly straighter than it had before. And now it was being circled by birds.

I

At The Mountains of Vague Misgivings

Damn it! The alarm didn't go off!

Or, rather:

"Damn it! The alarm went off, and he didn't hear it!"

His ears were buzzing, loudly. And he'd had that dream again.

The woman and the birds.

The small mechanical clock had exhausted its ringing more than an hour ago. Vayle Endlight opened his eyes long enough to check the time, then shut them again. He'd wanted to get an early start on the last leg of his journey, in order to reach Barrelslee before dark. He opened his eyes again and fixed his gaze on the now-silent clock. His vision held steady, with no rolling or shifting to the side. That was good. He shook the last traces of sleep from his head and sat up.

The rosy glow of the volcanoes was already being dulled by the white sun, a quarter of the way up the sky. The volcanoes rumbled and spat. They formed a smoky line of rock and redness to the South. He heard nothing of their grumbling.

From a distance, it might have seemed the man had slept with his head resting on his horse, which, legs crossed beneath it, head held erect, had been very still for the duration of the night.

But a closer look would make it obvious that the horse was smaller than a regular horse, or even a pony. And no horse had ever sat so still for so long.

No, it was an artificial horse the man had used as a pillow. Now, in the daylight, one could see it was made of cloth and wire and yarn, knitted and stitched together from bright fabrics and ornaments. It was a hobbyhorse. Not a child's hobbyhorse, but the kind one saw in village festivals, designed for celebratory and ceremonial use.

Vayle Endlight rose and gathered up the supplies and small bundles he'd assembled around the 'horse' before going to sleep. Then he buckled himself into the artificial horse,

wearing it at his waist, its decorated head pointing forward. He wore the hobbyhorse (he called it "the Rig") like a big belt. Its body opened sideways, hinged at the middle. Once it was buckled around his waist, he fastened the shoulder straps.

Endlight attached the 'blanket' he'd slept under to the sides of the horse, so that it fell like a riding gown, down toward the sand. The riding gown bore a striking diamond pattern of red and gold. The Rig was less heavy than it looked. Endlight took off at a brisk pace towards Barrelslee.

From a distance – a much greater distance, now that the sun was up and bright in the sky – one might have thought they saw a man, riding a horse.

Vayle Endlight tried to ignore the buzzing and hissing in his ears and listen to the sounds of the desert. He wasn't listening for the usual sounds – the sharp cries of sand-hawks, or the subtle coaxings of the wind against the dunes — but those other much-more-elusive sounds of the desert radio stations. He heard its vague voices at the edge of his consciousness, and sporadic bits of music — and there, just *there*, was it a fragment of disembodied laughter that he heard?

It was always hard to hear desert radio clearly though, and today his tinnitus completely overwhelmed its murmurs. Endlight wondered if he would lose the ability to hear the radio transmissions, too, when he completely lost his ability to hear the everyday, normal world.

Purposely goofy, and imposing in an absurd way, the Rig's head bobbed as Vayle Endlight walked faster. Small bells jingled from the Rig's fancy bridle.

When Endlight accelerated his walk to a trot, the Rig took over. Vayle and the Rig glided swiftly over the crusty terrain.

Vayle's feet, toes pointed downward, skimmed over the Salt Flats, six inches off the ground.

Heading away from the volcanoes, Vale guided the Rig toward the Salt Flats, that great grey portion of the desert covered with ropy veins of glistening salt. The mountains that were his final destination were just a rocky scribble on the horizon.

His thoughts turned to the dream he'd had, and had been having, for weeks now: The woman and the birds. He'd been seeing the woman in his dreams for much longer than that. Since he was a boy. He never remembered them very well. But lately, the tone of the dreams had changed. Last night, he saw the woman lying on a stone altar under a cloudy sky.

Birds circled, then descended.

The birds tore into her. She became a hot avian pie of birds, the vessel of their bloody internal nesting. They filled her with feather and beak and claw. They fed on her from within, they ate her hair from inside her scalp, they pecked out places behind her eyelids. They left her dazed, the color of ashes, sapped and exhausted.

It was a horrible, disturbing image, and he tried to put it out of his mind. But, not the woman.

He tried to picture her face clearly for the millionth time, and failed.

Vayle glided more slowly through the last miles of the Salt Flats. He was now at the desert's edge and past the reach of the desert radio stations.

He had only the insistent *buzzzz* of the recently begun tinnitus in his right ear, and the familiar, quieter *burrrrr* in his left ear. The tinnitus rose and fell in volume. He had good days and bad days. This was a bad day. The mountain towns would be noisy when he got there and that would be hard to take if the tinnitus didn't die down before he got there.

But he had a few quieter stops to make, before his ascent into the mountains.

The first of these would be the clockmaker's shop.

At the base of the Mountains, houses and small dwellings began to appear. He soon reached the clockmaker's place. He handed him the alarm clock. Vayle Endlight's clock was a handsome, box-shaped thing, wrapped on three sides in faded leather. Its face was burgundy and the dial and numbers were the color of sour cream.

"Lower the pitch, please, and make it louder."

He'd made the same request the last time he'd been there. He was losing the higher tones, that was certain.

The clockmaker asked for no explanations and nodded, disappearing into his workroom. The two brass bells at the top of the clock would be replaced by two that were larger, louder, and lower.

While the clockmaker worked, Vayle Endlight searched his shop for useful items. Like most of the shops at the desert's edge, it served more than one purpose. There were books here, and maps, along with other small items useful to the traveler.

Current maps of the Periphery were always of use. The shape and contents of the Periphery were always changing, and the mapmakers published revised maps as often as they could, hoping to keep up. Endlight studied the one with the most recent date of printing. He saw that Coomreedin had crept west since the last time he'd purchased a map. And new towns were appearing in the honeycombed hills near Diloxhyl. The once-towering realm of Serfendry had been sinking into the ground for years, and now seemed to have sunken completely. But a new sand formation had been documented on the other side of the volcanoes. Endlight made a mental note to go there soon to have a look.

He scanned the changes in the dimensions of Whorsnest with less interest, having sworn never to go near it. He saw that its borders had bulged a little, but that should surprise no one.

Then Endlight turned his attention to the books. Books were among his chief pleasures in life, though he only carried a few with him at a time. A small collection was lined up neatly on a low shelf. Endlight chose one with an ornately engraved spine and slid it out from its place on the shelf.

Ah — *Pinapplio, The Pineapple that Yearned to be a Boy.*

Pinapplio was a well-known fantasy tale, an old chestnut that illustrators were attracted to for its wild and risqué imagery. He read a few lines from its first page: "*Pinapplio wanted nothing more than to be a boy, a living, real boy, instead of a pineapple. He yearned to tell the rude jokes they told, play their rowdy games, and experience the thrill of their childish conspiracies and ill-timed erections ...*"

Vale left with the altered clock, the map he'd chosen, and a tin of hard mints for the friend he was going to see in the mountains.

The Rig bore him into the mountains. Endlight was, perhaps a more impressive sight than he'd have guessed, with his cape and long blond hair, and decorated fake horse.

Behind him the volcanoes were now just a luminous fizz on the horizon. The abrupt and unlikely transition from arid desert to the lush mountain lowlands began in earnest, and the trail became subtly but unmistakably tilted upward.

He passed small farms. Then buildings of stone and impressive masonry became more common, finally culminating in the gabled roofs and chimneys of Barrelslee. It was just before dusk. Lamplighters were beginning their work. The streets were cobbled, and he shared them with other travelers on horseback and in carriages. But most were on foot. There were apothecaries, rooming houses, a grain store, and several pubs. He saw several impressive fountains. Roofs were steepled and covered with curled orange shingles. It was late summer, and the city was full of bright flowers, lush, in striking contrast to the desert he'd left behind him.

The Rig drew little attention from the citizens of Barrelslee, as fashion, or means of transportation. People rode all sorts of beasts and contraptions through the cities and outlands of the Periphery.

Vayle bore the Rig easily, and steered its artificial equine head masterfully through the crowded places. Beneath the gown of the Rig, he walked as one normally would. Travel by means of the Rig — that is, becoming a passenger, a mere rider of its low skimming over the ground — took psychic energy, and more attention from Val than an onlooker might have guessed. In the vast reaches of the desert, letting the Rig “fly” was the best way to cover ground. But in places such as Barrelslee, it was easier to wear the Rig, but walk in the normal fashion.

He navigated the half-remembered streets until, without much difficulty, he found the Musetoreum. The Musetoreum was owned and operated by the friend he had come to see: Vaughn Earl-Royal, who had recently begun referring to himself as “The Pale Ontologist.”

Vayle Endlight rang the bell of the Musetoreum and Vaughn Earl-Royal appeared almost instantly. He was a slight man with a high forehead and rather long flat nose, with a pile of great bushy hair on either side of his head.

The two men greeted each other warmly, and Vaughn Earl-Royal guided his guest into the Musetoreum, which was only shown to visitors by appointment and was, but for themselves, empty.

Endlight detached himself from the Rig and left the hobbyhorse folded up neatly in the antechamber. Vaughn Earl-Royal guided him into the Musetoreum's first gallery.

The centerpiece of the room was a huge and monstrous puppet head, with twenty bulging eyes and large box-shaped teeth. Great tufts of camel's hair were fastened in patches to its chin. Green paint was peeling from the surface of the puppet's angry face. At the top of each pointed ear was a metal ring big enough to put one's hand through.

"I'm delighted you got here this evening, Val," Vaughn Earl-Royal said, using the casual version of Endlight's first name. "I'm having dinner at eight with a remarkable friend. I can't wait to introduce the two of you."

Vaughn Earl-Royal's clothing was almost princely, but Vayle Endlight knew that Vaughn Earl-Royal came from modest beginnings. He favored the colors blue and gold, and his outfit was a clear illustration of that preference. He was wearing a periwinkle waistcoat, white breeches with gold buttons, and a short silk cape of very deep blue. The cape had a high collar trimmed with lacy gold ornament. Vaughn Earl-Royal's sense of fashion was considered flamboyant even in cosmopolitan Barrelslee, whose citizens were used to the excesses of foreign visitors' clothing.

Vayle realized that the gold his friend wore was artificial, as was most of the 'gold' on display in the Musetoreum. Vaughn Earl-Royal had some wealth from an inheritance, but he was not rich. Nor did he make much money from the Musetoreum, nor were the items he found and curated there of any real value to anyone but a collector of the most rarefied sort of taste.

Earl-Royal guided Vayle Endlight past costumes on mannequins, smaller crumbling puppets under glass, and the spiked tail of what might have been a mummified dragon,

toward his office in the back of the galleries. This was Earl-Royal's inner sanctum, and it was where he kept the truly remarkable stuff.

Vaughn Earl-Royal's inner sanctum was a small but well-appointed place, filled with curiosities and examples of recent advances in metaphysical tools and esoteric machinery. This was the part of Earl-Royal's collection that anyone could see. His more serious finds were only for him and his close circle of friends. Vayle stole glances at items on the shelves he didn't recognize, although he was sure that Earl-Royal would make him formally acquainted with them before the end of the visit. The walls were covered with masks of monstrous faces, and the shelves were lined with fake constructions of all sorts of wild beasts. At the end of the pleasantly lit room was a *papier-mâché* replica of a huge dinosaur bone (Vayle guessed it was a femur). On a cluttered worktable next to it he saw a partially dissected Victrola, and three imposing and ornate sound horns.

Vayle paused to look at a carefully sealed poster inside a thick frame on the wall. It was ancient, and one had to look closely to make the faded image out on the crumbling paper it was printed on. He knew the image, and the history of the poster. It was one of Vaughn Earl-Royal's most-cherished possessions, dating back to the age of the Desert Mummies who'd once roamed the deserts, projecting mystery plays on giant stone screens.

The Desert Mummies were a vanished sect of powerful mystics who'd pioneered the art of 'motion pictures.' The fake monsters and artificial cities Vaughn Earl-Royal hunted down and excavated were made by the Desert Mummies for use in their films. Hundreds of silent films were made by the Desert Mummies before they'd disappeared. Their habit, apparently, was to abandon the props and creatures they created after completion of their films, leaving them to be covered and borne away by the restless movements of the sand.

The life's work of the Pale Ontologist was to bring these strange chimerical deities and artificial gods to the surface; to study and finally display them in the Musetorium. Endlight knew there was a theatre in the lowest floor of the Musetorium where Vaughn Earl-Royal hosted rare screenings of the ancient films.

Earl-Royal had even recovered a few of the actual films of the Desert Mummies, but he kept these finds to himself and a small circle of friends. In one of those ancient films was

the giant head displayed in the first gallery. It had been part of a complete puppet, twice the size of a human being. The rings at the side of its head were the fittings for two of the long poles that the puppeteers used to animate the creature, which Earl-Royal thought was a minor demon called Ursevus. Other non-human roles in the Desert Mummies' motion pictures were played by small, animated models. They were animated using a fascinating technique called 'stop-motion.' These could be even more convincing on film than the human-controlled puppets, as they left no clues, on film, as to the artificial cause of their movements.

The Mummies had also devised means of combining these stop motion creatures with live actors, so that the invented creatures, though actually small models like the ones on Vaughn Earl-Royal's display shelf, seemed to tower over their living human co-stars. The people of the Periphery, of the present or the past, had never seen the productions of a Melies or a Harryhausen, but if they had, they might have seen a similarity in their methods of making moving pictures.

There were rumors that the Desert Mummies killed the human cast of their productions after filming, but Earl-Royal said this was probably not true. But they did bury the elaborate sets and props and costumes from their productions in the vast sands of the desert, as soon as a film was completed.

Vaughn Earl-Royal's obsession with the Desert Mummies and their creations was not simply that of an antiquarian. He was convinced that the Mummies were mystics of the highest order, and that the films they made were the summation of their understanding of existence, and all the forms of consciousness that emerged from it. The stop motion monsters and fantastic creatures in them were icing on the cake.

But back to the poster: the writing on it had crumbled and faded beyond reading. It seemed though to have been so ornate as to raise the possibility that it was not writing at all, but some sort of abstract imagery. The Ontologist said though it was definitely writing, most likely the title of the film and possibly where and when it could be viewed.

The illustrated portion of the poster had fared better. One could still make out carefully rendered image showing a man in ‘wizard’s clothing,’ walking down a mountainous incline, followed by a six of large, intricately-decorated spheres. The spheres seemed to be rolling in a line behind the wizard.

Vayle remembered the first time Vaughn Earl-Royal showed him the treasured movie poster. “This poster was hand-painted, thousands of years ago,” Earl-Royal said reverently (although time was different in the desert, especially under the sand. Time was malleable, and in the deep desert, Time could change its mind about how old something was).

Val had peered into the faded pigment. The huge spheres that followed the wizard looked like children’s toys. They were decorated with swirling stripes, stars, and pinwheels. He imagined in its original colors the picture would have been eye-popping. The balls were the first thing one noticed in the picture, then the wizard, who seemed to be leading their way down the mountainous incline, in his tassel-belted robe and curvy-toed sandals.

The third thing one noticed was the dogs. There was a pack of rambunctious dogs running alongside the balls, which were twice the size of the wizard. The dogs were running gleefully, from what Val could make of the faded image. Their mouths were open, and they seemed jubilant and lively. One had the sense that the dogs were pushing and herding the balls down the slope.

“It should be obvious what this depicts, Val” Vaughn Earl-Royal said, on that first night.

“Of course,” Val answered. “It’s the escape of Pin-Uthra.”

”Exactly!”

The story of Pin-Uthra was a famous one. It was one of the oldest legends in the Periphery. Countless books had been written about it — variations and interpretations, naturally, but all sharing the same basic elements. There were children’s songs about Pin-Uthra. Any doll or statue or picture of a generic wizard was called a ‘Pin-Uthra.’

Tonight though was not the time for studying the poster again. Endlight turned his attention back to Vaughn Earl-Royal, who was again promising that Vayle would be

fascinated by the friend they'd be having dinner with. But he hadn't gotten very far when he stopped and asked: "Val, are you hearing me all right?"

He had noticed that Val seemed to listening with some effort to him since he'd arrived.

Vaughn Earl-Royal knew all about Vayle Endlight's hearing problem. It had started ten years ago with a sudden and disturbing loss of hearing in his left ear. At first, Val could hear nothing through it but a roaring tinnitus and loud bursts of bizarre noises. Sometimes it was like the cracking of ice. Other times, the hum of a machine. And other times, loud, wordless voices, an insistent chorus void of content or meaning. Meanwhile the left ear's ability to hear sounds from the real world was practically nil.

Eventually, these most unsettling effects of the hearing loss receded. But the left ear was left with a sharp and ever-present HISS that was with Endlight to this very day. The hearing in his left ear improved slightly, but what he could hear sounded flat, and distant. Endlight adapted as best he could. He found ways to ignore the tinnitus, and he relied mostly on his right ear, with some small assistance from the diminished left.

He told Vaughn Earl-Royal that he'd recently suffered a second event similar to the first, this time in the right ear.

"I have to say it is maddening," he confessed. "And considerably worse than what I experienced ten years ago, on the other side of my head. If I cover my left ear — strangely, it has now become my 'good' ear — what I hear through the right ear is far off and distorted, like a signal from a very tiny radio receiver. The tinnitus is loud, and the hiss on the left mingles with the humming and buzzing on the right in a totally unsettling manner."

Vaughn Earl-Royal was uncomfortable with bad news, and while he could boast of a great social dexterity, his forte was not the comforting of troubled friends.

So he was relieved when Vayle Endlight's said: "However, I have a plan."

Then Vayle Endlight told Vaughn Earl-Royal what his plan was.

The clock chimed.

“Eight O Clock,” Vaughn Earl-Royal said. “We must leave for the restaurant. You’ll like my friend Maigraive, Val. He’s a most unusual fellow.”

The Pale Ontologist took Vayle Endlight to a lofty restaurant with a windowed dining room that overlooked the valley. Endlight followed him through the reception hall where there was a cage full of colorful songbirds. Their twittering sounded flat and off-key to him, and reminded him of the birds in his dreams. He hurried past them.

The dining room was all rich wood and shadows, and a fireplace glowed from the middle of the almost empty room. Night was falling, and through the windows they could see the other side of a deep valley. They could see the lights of a neighboring mountain town beginning to glow. Higher than that, the cliffs drew up and surrendered their details to the encroaching darkness.

Vaughn Earl-Royal led Vayle to the dining room, an enclosed balcony that looked out at the mountains.

One diner sat at a table.

Even if the room had been full, which it was not, Endlight would have guessed that this was the friend that Earl-Royal wanted to introduce him to. The diner was a large crocodilian, broad-shouldered and stout, who amiably raised a stein of beer in their direction as they entered the room. He sat in the chair in the manner that a man would, and he was dressed as a man, too, in a full suit with vest and burgundy cravat, made of a cloth Endlight could not name, but felt certain was expensive. A dark cape was thrown over the back of the crocodile’s chair. His mouth was open in a reptilian half-smile that showed a fearsome set of conical teeth, and beneath the immense lower jaw was a bulbous and jowly throat, out of which the crocodilian croaked a jovial “good evening.”

Earl-Royal led Vayle to the table with obvious satisfaction and made the introductions. He introduced Vayle to the crocodile first, then followed with: “Vayle, this is my illustrious friend, Cassius Maigraive.”

“Delighted!” Cassius Maigraive growled, extending a scaly hand toward Vayle. He added, “I have never regretted meeting a friend of the Pale Ontologist.”

Like most people, Vayle Endlight had never met a crocodilian. But he knew a thing or two about them, as they were the stuff of legend in the Periphery. A crocodilian's life — at least the long first half of it, anyway — was spent in battle, far beneath the surface of the mad city of Whorsnest. Only late in life could crocodilians leave the war behind, and make the hard climb to the surface, if they did not perish first in their eternal, subterranean war.

After they'd taken their seats, Vaughn Earl-Royal said to Maigraive: "Val is undoubtedly excited to meet a crocodilian, and is definitely bursting with questions. But he's far too polite to ask them outright. Lest he dance around his curiosity the whole evening, let me impose on you, Maigraive, to tell us about your unusual life, and of course your experience as a crocodile soldier."

Cassius Maigraive nodded good-naturedly and settled back into his chair. "Of course! I would be glad to. To begin with recent history, I came to the surface three years ago almost to the day. Since that emergence, I have made it my business to tour the Periphery as much as possible, and learn its many ways. I have sought to experience as much as I can, in as many places possible. Most recently, I visited the great Fissures of Kazkdan. You may have heard of them. Great splits in the earth where Knowledge itself rises up in steaming clouds! Scholars flock there, to bask in the fumes and soak up as much as they can. Indeed, I found myself growing smarter by the day! But I only stayed a short while."

"Why is that, Cassius?" Val inquired.

"I grew tired of their wise cracks," the crocodile said with a straight face.

Then he tilted his head back and laughed.

Endlight had long considered puns a disappointing form of humor, and he felt that brief letdown at hearing an interesting story suddenly deflated as the set-up for a joke. But he nodded in recognition of the crocodilian's play on words.

The crocodile's opening remarks bore out one part of their legend: they were irrepressible fans of puns, jokes, and comical narratives. It was a remnant of their years of battle in the wet, jam-packed tunnels beneath Whorsnest. Their turgid, clawing warfare took forever, so packed in were they, so while clawing at each other they would tell these stories

and jokes to pass the time. Crocodile wars were more an endurance contest than a battle, for there was no apparent goal, no objective, no hill to take, of flag to plant, using stories and puns to pass the time as they tore and bit at each other, while Whorsnestian citizens, far above — their plumbing clogged by the subterranean conflict — cursed their plugged up sinks and toilets.

Crocodiles were soldiers in the young adult stage of their mythic lives. Later, if they reached a full maturity, they would climb their way out of the vast network of plumbing beneath the city. Once in fresh air, they sometimes matured into erudite retired warriors, done with warfare but still fond of the old verbal games they played for so long.

Having just witnessed the crocodilian fondness for puns and plays-on-words, Endlight had a sudden (and correct) intuition that it was Cassius Maigraive who had cleverly combined the two passions of his friend Vaughn Earl-Royal – his love for abstract musings on the nature of Being, and his equal passion for the digging up of ancient things in the desert — into one amusing nom de plume – *The Pale Ontologist* — which reflected his passion for ontology, and his own peculiar form of paleontology. Adding to its cleverness was that it also took on a descriptive dimension, considering Earl-Royal's ghostly complexion.

Thus began a complex and lively discussion as they waited for their meal.

Vayle Endlight and Vaughn Earl-Royal were studious types, and the topics they introduced had to do with ideas. Cassius Maigraive was of a more earthy nature, and his contributions had more to do with news and experiences of the world.

After only a little conversation, and Val reversed his first impression of the crocodile. He found him quite impressive, indeed.

We might privately wonder, during the course of this three-sided conversation, at the erudition of the crocodilian — considering he had only joined those on the surface of the Periphery a few short years ago. Cassius Maigraive had quickly defined himself as an inexhaustible source of gossip, trivia, and indeed bona fide scholarly knowledge, before the first course of the meal had been served. But his knowledge of the surface world was not so

great a mystery as to some it might seem. For the sewers, packed with waste from the denizens of Whorsnest, was a vast informational network of excrement, from which the crocodilians, miles of pipes and plumbing below, absorbed the thoughts and ideas of those who shat into it. One might well become the sort of good-humored scholar that Cassius Maigraive appeared to be, through a lifetime of judicious and well-considered absorption of shit.

This leads us to consider — hastily, before the food arrives — the waste management situation of the wretched city of Whorsnest. While it was true that Whorsnest was a cauldron of ignorance and depravity and the worst that the human recipe could result in, it was also true that among its captive citizens were intelligent and educated souls. The thoughts of these tortured souls were what Maigraive had built his emerging psyche on. Their hard-earned education was what took root and flowered, eventually, in his crocodilian mind.

The higher demons — the *torturers* — of Whorsnest did not use the plumbing at all. Otherwise, only madness and evil would have made its way down to the crocodiles. It was said that the feces of these lunatic flying monsters detonated upon expulsion, and atomized, becoming one with the very molecules of the air which the lesser citizens of Whorsnest breathed.

You see? Whorsnest deserved its awful reputation.

At any rate, this was how it was possible, and common, for crocodilians to "educate" themselves, in a second-hand way, from the city that existed above them. There were soldiers who, once retired, climbed happily up to Whorsnest and stayed there. But there were others, like Maigraive, left the city, and most of its madness, behind them.

And here is the food.

Two waiters brought out platters of roast turkey and spicy gravy, and there was schnitzel and baked potatoes and roasted greens and asparagus. A loaf of black bread was placed within the reach of all three diners, and dishes with slabs of fresh butter. More beer and tall glasses of cold mineral water.

If the crocodile really had spent most of his life in the sewers, he looked and smelled no worse for it. His clothing was clean, and if any scent came from him at all, it was of beer and a subtle but robust cologne. His table manners, too, could not be faulted. He took care to sit back in his chair, so as not to crowd or menace anyone with his long snout. And he handled the silverware with great dexterity, placing the food sideways into his mouth just at the corner of his great jaws.

Maigraive's exposition on the life of a crocodile soldier was just ending.

"The crocodile war beneath the surface is a cosmological fact. There is, perhaps, no explaining it. But to deny the reality of it is not an option. I myself am living proof of its reality. We are born in the sewers, we fight there, and some of us live long enough to leave the sewers and claw our way to the surface. One "reason" for the whole affair, that I will share with you now, has been proposed. It has been said that the subterranean war of the crocodiles, the primal heat of it, its lack of ending, is a power source, a sort of engine, that fuels existence on the surface. That its raw brutal power and intensity is the engine of this higher plane of reality. This explanation, if true, makes our war the foundation of the creation of higher worlds. It casts the whole thing in a Divine light. The point of our warfare may be the realization of higher worlds." The crocodilian asserted this with pride.

The Pale Ontologist said "You appreciate honesty, Cassius, so I'll say it outright. Crocodiles, wrestling in a sewer full of shit, does not strike me as Divine."

The crocodile took the comment in stride. "Alas, it is the life we're born to. An ugly life, perhaps, but it is ours. The fortunate among us find the Divine in what we're given."

The two clinked glasses. Vayle recognized it was the good-natured sparring of close friends. (And shall we call Vayle "Val" from now on, too, now that we've gotten to know him better?)

Vaughn Earl-Royal decided it was time to change the topic.

He leaned in toward Maigraive and said: "Val's got the most extraordinary project in the works."

“Does he?” the crocodile asked, very interested. Val however felt a jolt at Vaughn Earl-Royal’s blunt and unasked-for introduction to Val sharing his plan. It was one thing to tell it to Earl-Royal a few hours ago, in the privacy of the Musetoreum. But he had only known Cassius Maigraive a few hours.

He knew that Vaughn Earl-Royal was proud of his friends’ eccentricities. Was he trying to impress Maigraive with the unorthodox nature of Val’s thinking, and Val’s new, admittedly audacious response to his hearing loss? Earl-Royal had, after all, beamed, when he surprised Val with an unexpected dinner with a crocodilian soldier.

But, what of it? Cassius Maigraive seemed like a deep and unconventional thinker, and not without his share of unusual knowledge. He might have something useful to add to Val’s plan.

So he leaned toward Maigraive as well and spilled the beans.

He told him about his tinnitus, the vertigo, and his rapidly declining hearing. Cassius Maigraive had in fact noticed that Val seemed to be straining to hear the conversation at times. And there were a couple of times he was certain that Val hadn’t caught something that was said, and merely pretended that he had. “I’ve consulted doctors of both the scientific and magical disciplines, with no results. Artificial ears and potions have done no good. Hearing trumpets only make me look silly. To be honest, the situation has caused me a great deal of unhappiness.”

“No doubt,” the crocodile said.

Magic and Medicine were on mostly equal footing in the Periphery. Both Magic and Medicine were for the most part crude and unreliable callings, and both had their share of quacks, cure-barkers and con men. Both doctors and witches preyed upon the desperate and gullible, and many suffering people saw both professions as a last resort. But of the two, Magic was the most popular approach to things in the Periphery. It was the experience of all three diners in this conversation that non-ordinary means were the best solutions to both physical and metaphysical problems.

Val Endlight had abandoned the practice of consulting doctors about his hearing loss, and had come to consider more fantastic ways of combating it. But magic had failed him in this regard as decisively as science.

“Having tried a variety of spells and enchantments and consulted witches, oracles, and magicians of many persuasions, none of whom were able to stop the deterioration of my hearing, I have imagined a way of exploiting the dimensions of my apparently incurable and progressive loss of hearing. To adapt to it, with gusto!”

Val leaned forward. “Have you heard of the phenomenon called the ‘phantom limb’? Cases where a person loses an arm or leg, through amputation or accident, but after recovery from the loss, continues to feel pain and sensation in the missing limb?”

The crocodilian nodded from the other side of the table. Of course, Val realized. Of all the diners in the room, it was Cassius Maigraive who was most likely to be familiar with it.

“In the sewers, many of us lost limbs. I remember the complaints of soldiers, who felt tingling, or outright pain, in limbs they’d lost, years before.”

“I am told that tinnitus – the maddening hiss I hear in my damaged ears each day — is a form of the phantom limb phenomenon,” Val said. “The brain seeks to supply information to an area that is suddenly void of it. Tinnitus is the phantom limb of the inner ear. What vacant space is left by a loss of hearing is filled by the roar and hiss of tinnitus, courtesy of the brain.

“But why does the brain throw garbage in? The brain is a versatile and some say mostly-untapped organ. Why can it not fill that space with something more valuable?”

“I see,” said the crocodile. “You would ask that the brain, your brain, fill the vacuum of your deafness with something more than auditory nonsense.”

It was the idea that Val had explained to Vaughn Earl-Royal earlier in the evening. Earl-Royal found the idea audacious, but interesting.

“Look at the desert radio stations! They pull their sounds and voices from the ether; some would say the Sourceworld itself. Can my brain, my very advancing deafness, be made to do as much?”

Maigraive nodded. Val was clearly modeling his project on those desert radio stations, which, theoretically, pulled signals from the Sourceworld and the DreamSuck, and broadcast them to able receivers. (The DreamSuck was supposedly made up of fragmented consciousness emanating from the inhabitants of the Sourceworld, though the existence of both of those realms had never been definitively verified.)

It could not be disputed, though, that the mysterious radio stations did pick up signals from somewhere.

Considering this, Cassius Maigraive allowed that Vayle Endlight's plan for erecting radio towers in the wilderness of his own psyche was not so absurd as might initially seem.

Val imagined the current state of his hearing as a tilted, asthmatic antenna on a plane of bare rocks and scrub-grass. This antenna was the source of the Hiss, the Tinnitus — could that tower be reimagined, tilted upright, energized, medicated, corrected, to broadcast something more than loud, empty air? Could a radio “station” be connected to that tower, one that offered more than sonic gibberish?

“I am proposing that my ears — the very deafness of them — become a radio receiver — ”

“A ‘phantom limb’ radio station!” Maigraive said, finishing Val's thought.

“Yes!”

The Pale Ontologist thought Val's idea had merit, and he could tell that Maigraive thought so too. For the Ontologist, the thing that made it compelling was its use of the brain. No other organ — through inspiration, injury, or distress — was capable of producing such varied and intriguing responses. The stomach, liver, intestines, *et cetera*, were all mere sacks of blubber by comparison. Their knee-jerk responses to stimulus were so boring and unimaginative! Those organs interested Vaughn Earl-Royal only when they caused him discomfort.

The brain, on the other hand, was an unexplored continent, a world even, and the things it could yield when courted and enhanced by its owner were prodigious. He thought first of drugs, of absinthe, of the hallucinatory mushrooms that were traded and revered in

the mountains. Also, there were those confounding maladies that could be traced back to the gray organ, and the peculiar effects they produced in the afflicted.

Val's idea had reminded Earl-Royal of his mother, who had slowly gone blind. She had experienced a strange altering of her perceptions in the later stages of her deteriorating eyesight.

To support what Val was describing to Maigraive, Earl-Royal shared this anecdote:

"As my mother's sight deteriorated, leaving large gaps in what she could see, but also leaving fragments of her vision intact, she began to see in the 'blank spots' things that were not there. For example: when we looked at photos, she would see those who actually were in the photograph, but others who weren't in the photo as well. She would insist that a picture of two people was actually a picture of three.

"As her blindness progressed further, she began to see two girls in fancy dresses in her living quarters. The girls were silent and non-threatening, and she came to enjoy their occasional presence. Especially as those people around her, of the 'real world,' had been reduced to dim shadows."

Val was familiar with the tale. "A very similar thing to the predicament of my own brain, filling my head with the Tinnitus. But I would ask that my 'two silent girls' speak. And who knows what they might tell me? Or what unearthly song might they sing? I would ask more, in exchange for the loss of my hearing."

Vaughn Earl-Royal observed: "Val is always looking for information! My mother was only seeking only companionship. She was quite satisfied with her two silent girls."

Now that the plan had been discussed, Val was delighted that Maigraive, who seemed a no-nonsense sort, was not dismissive of it. Maigraive seemed to not only find his idea intriguing, but delightful — in a mad, improbable way, of course.

"The Improbability Factor is, naturally, a part of its projected success," Val said to the crocodile.

"It would have to be," Maigraive affirmed. "I would advise avoiding even the smallest concessions to good sense in the pursuit of this goal. Stick to the preposterous, and it may work!"

The dining room had filled up since they had arrived, and the conversation in the room was becoming hectic and confusing to Val's beleaguered ears. He excused himself for the restroom.

"Your friend is quite mad," the crocodile said to the Pale Ontologist once Val had left the table. "I could become fond of him."

For some reason, public lavatories were a bizarre affair in the Periphery, each with its own confusing rules of etiquette and behavior. More often than not, using one was not worth the embarrassment, and the exertion of social dexterity that was required. He was relieved to find that the situation here was simple and forthright, and that he was the only visitor.

Vayle stepped up to the urinal and released the kraken.

Minutes later Val was back with his friends in the dining room. Night had fallen completely, and the mountains were covered with glowing dots, and the drifting fireflies of balloons and airships.

Vaughn Earl-Royal was feeling pleased at the combination of his two friends, Val and Cassius. They seemed to get along admirably. Earl-Royal, who considered social matchmaking a talent of his, was proud of that the combination of Endlight and Maigraive appeared so promising.

Beyond that were those secret hopes he had of what would come of making the introduction. His next and most exciting project to date depended on the cooperation of both Val and Maigraive. A darker thing flickered in his mind, the thing he feared would make his proposal dangerous for all of them — but he pushed that dark misgiving aside. He sipped his beer, and sparred amiably with Maigraive, until Val returned to the table.

Val got another look at Cassius Maigraive as he found their table again. This time Val noticed the powerful ridged tail of the crocodilian, curled sideways from the chair and extending downward to disappear under the table.

Val mused that Cassius Maigraive could probably have killed all of the diners in the restaurant in a manner of minutes, and eaten half of them in the same amount of time. He had noticed guests at other tables sneaking uneasy looks at the retired reptilian warrior. But Maigraive had done nothing to suggest he was anything other than the most jovial and well-mannered diner in the room.

They had dessert. Raspberry tortes were brought to them on a silver plate, along with a variety of wrapped chocolates.

Late in the evening — when they had talked of psychic radio stations and the theory of derivative worlds, and silent, imagined girls and mysterious signals in the desert — the Pale Ontologist, Vaughn Earl-Royal, gave his reason for calling his two friends to this meeting.

“After much research and inquiry,” he said, “I have come into possession of a map. As you both know, the driving passion of my work is the reassembly of the works of the Desert Mummies, primarily based on the recovery of their films and the props and mechanisms they used to create them. I am now certain of the location of some abandoned props from the creation of their greatest film (it is said, though I have never seen it) *The Escape of Pin-Uthra*.”

“The magician?” Maigraive asked.

“The wizard,” Vaughn Earl-Royal corrected.

He continued. “Conditions of the A.F.O.M., and the unstable dimensions of the Periphery, have long made the recovery of these artifacts impossible. But these conditions have shifted. The artifacts are now within my reach, and the map could be followed to them by a modest expedition of just three adventurers. I propose that the three of us are that trio.”

“And what would we be looking for?” Maigraive asked. “A papier-mâché Cyclops, or a painted backdrop? I hope there’s no digging involved in this scheme ...”

“The spheres are hidden in easily-accessible tunnels, Maigraive. Not buried.”

“Spheres?” Val said. He remembered the decorated spheres from the poster in Vaughn Earl-Royal’s Musetorium.

“The same,” the Ontologist confirmed. “What a find, eh? The film itself has eluded me for decades, but to have the spheres created for its production would be amazing!”

“Can you be certain of your information, though, Vaughn?” Val said.

“I have it on the highest authority.”

Val nodded. He knew that Earl-Royal was a master of research, with a whole network of eccentric but highly educated friends who might well know about a thing like this.

“How modest an expedition are you talking about?” Maigraive wanted to know. He knew the Ontologist’s modest projects often grew prodigiously in the course of being pursued.

“I can show you,” the Ontologist said, removing a folded map from the pocket of his cape.

He spread it out on the table. The complex map meant nothing to either Val or Cassius Maigraive.

“We can be there and back again in a month’s time,” Vaughn Earl-Royal said, running his finger over a crazy quilt of lines and instructions. After we leave the desert we will have to travel A.F.O.M. But Val and I are up to that, Maigraive.”

Traveling A.F.O.M. was a paranormal method of enhanced travel through the real world. It was difficult, even for those few who were able to do it. Navigation through A.F.O.M. territories was notoriously demanding.

“This route is far beyond my skills, Vaughn,” Val said.

“But well within my own,” Vaughn Earl-Royal replied.

“The map is written in your own hand,” Val observed.

“Yes! I copied it from the original, which I have put away for safekeeping. But rest assured, Val, this map is not guesswork or supposition on my part.”

Maigraive said “Seems like a lot of work for some props from an ancient motion picture.”

But he said this mostly to annoy Vaughn Earl-Royal.

“Work? I speak of adventure!” the Pale Ontologist cried. He said it with such panache that a sleepy waiter, anxious to shut down the restaurant for the night, looked over.

From down the hall Val heard the tinny chirping of the birds.

II

Swords Against Sleepwalkers

For the second morning in a row, Cassius Maigraive came to Vayle Endlight's room covered in blood. The blood was not his own.

At the crocodilian's hip was a broadsword in a decorated scabbard — a gift from Vaughn Earl-Royal, the Pale Ontologist. Between hilt and scabbard, blood oozed.

Like the spatters and stains on Maigraive's vest and suit coat, the blood was grey.

"Another night of hunting?" Endlight inquired.

The crocodilian nodded affirmatively. "Incredible fun, Val," he said with obvious satisfaction. "You should have joined me."

In the week since Vaughn Earl-Royal had summoned Val to Barrelslee, Val and Cassius Maigraive had become firm friends. Val had to endure some truly awful puns, the humor of which he still did not perceive, but he found Maigraive's company overall to be immensely satisfying. His wit (beyond the puns) was quick and entertaining, and he was surprisingly well informed on any

number of topics. He also showed a great depth, and, beneath his blunt exterior, a compassionate and thoughtful nature.

Maigraive, in turn, had developed an equal affection for Val in the short time he'd known him.

Vaughn Earl-Royal had introduced Cassius Maigraive to a sort of game since he had arrived in Barrelslee. Barrelslee was experiencing a strange phenomenon. Naked, spectral sleepwalkers were roaming the city's cobbled streets in the late hours. Unseen by most, they wandered aimlessly and creepily in the shadows. Vaughn Earl-Royal knew of them through the army of "sources" that kept him informed on supernatural events in the mountain region. Vaughn claimed that the sleepwalkers were the shades of unfortunate dreamers whose astral forms were stuck between the everyday world and the realm of dreams. He said they suffered in this condition, and that the more of them that walked the city in this state, the more other dreamers would be dragged down too, into the same sorry state of affairs. It was an altruistic act, he maintained, to release these poor sleepers.

The means of doing this were unconventional, but, he was pleased to explain, well suited to Maigraive's skills

and natural inclinations. One could release the sleepwalkers by killing them — specifically, hacking them to death with a sword. He assured Maigraive that it would cause no harm to the innocent sleeper in everyday life. He compared it to obliterating a shadow by casting bright light on it: the shadow would vanish, but the thrower of the shadow remained unharmed. But what fun it would be to stalk these creatures, and do their hosts the favor of murdering them! Maigraive had confided to Vaughn Earl-Royal that the violent tendencies of his previous life were always with him, and caused him an unfortunate restlessness and anxiety. Against his better judgment, but curious, nonetheless, Val had let Maigraive talk him into joining him for a night of hunting. Val and Maigraive had spent a week now in Barrelslee, following their first dinner together. In this time neither of them had seen much of Vaughn Earl-Royal, who was busy making the preparations for their expedition.

Maigraive took great pleasure in tracking down the sleepwalkers, then hacking them to bloody mush with his sword. Whereupon, thankfully, the dismembered phantoms would vanish, as if they'd never been there. Maigraive had urged Val to accompany him on these nightly forays, but

except for the first outing, he declined. He had an aversion to violence, even this unworldly, ghostly type.

Maigraive, a retired soldier, was used to such things. But Val couldn't imagine chopping a sleeping person to bits, particularly a woman.

"Nonsense," Maigraive had huffed, when Val said this. "Two hacks with a broadsword and you can't even tell the difference! It's great fun, I tell you."

"For a psychopath," Val had answered, smiling.

The sleepwalkers were never children, it was noted, and Val wondered, but didn't ask, if his sword-wielding friend would have drawn the line at that. But, some of Maigraive's homicidal zeal can be excused. The sleepwalkers could not be dispatched with a civilized stabbing or even a decisive decapitation. If these modest efforts were employed, the assassin was left with a disturbingly mutilated, still writhing phantom. And once attacked, the sleepwalkers did make noise. They would scream and carry on, and all discretion on the part of the attacker would have been wasted. So the kill had to be final, and gorily brutal. Val had asked if the sleepwalkers could speak. Would they answer a question if asked?

“No,” he answered. “The screams are just a primal response. At least to the outside world, they have no real thoughts. They walk in this world, but any intelligence in them is locked away in their dreaming. And Earl-Royal assures me, killing a sleepwalker does not harm to the sleeper.”

At first, the somnambulists sounded like poor fuel for excitement, with their closed eyes and slow movements, and the fact that they had no weapons, and made no effort to fight back. What made the matter interesting for Maigraive was that he had to assassinate them out of view of the waking residents of Barrelee. There were laws against random killing there, even in case of spectral manifestations, so Maigraive had to keep his attacks secret and out of sight.

Maigraive enjoyed the intrigue of it, and the drama of playing the assassin.

Val and Maigraive walked the darkened streets of the city, and it wasn't long before they spotted a sleepwalker. It was exactly as Vaughn Earl-Royal had described.

They followed the vague form down the narrow streets of Barrelee, losing sight of it again and again. Maigraive's eyes, after decades in the dark, were keener

than Val's. The sleepwalker never lost them for long. The sleepwalker was ghostly, but not transparent. When it stepped into light, it was fully illuminated, as any physical body would be. But it merged better into the dark spots than a normal human would. Leaving an alley for a well-lit street, Val saw the wandering sleepwalker clearly.

It was a middle-aged naked man. The eyes were closed, which might account for its tentative, uncertain course through the city.

Maigraive leaped, and cut the thing to bloody ribbons. Having taken it completely by surprise, and nearly halved its body vertically with the first blow, the sleepwalker didn't put up any sort of fight, or cry out. It did however spray the empty street with a great fountain of grey blood. It continued to do so as Maigraive took it apart with his broadsword, till it was nothing more than a bloody pile of not-much on the pavement.

Then, even the grey not-much vanished.

Maigraive was exhilarated. "It's remarkable! They feel just like flesh and bone when you first cut into them!"

Maigraive was born for violence. He enjoyed seeing the effects of his brutality here, out of the darkness and claustrophobic confines of the sewers, though he enjoyed

the chopping more in the fashion of a skilled butcher than a warrior, as his victims put up no more resistance than a prime cut of beef.

Val had decided that one night of this activity was enough for him. Maigraive carried on the nocturnal sport alone.

Now, seated in Val's rented room in the light of morning, Cassius Maigraive studied the grey bloodstains on his coat sleeves, and was disappointed to see them fade away to nothing.

Today they would begin the expedition.

Outside of Val's rented room, Maigraive eyed the Rig with curiosity, but he asked no questions. It was obviously a magical sort of acquisition, if not a magical entity in its own right, and therefore a matter of privacy on Val's part. Val would tell him more about the unusual 'horse' when he was ready to.

Modest displays of magic were common throughout the Periphery, but it still took Maigraive a few minutes to get used to the sight of his friend gliding alongside him on his make-believe horse. The levitation of the hobbyhorse

didn't raise eyebrows as they left the town for the outer roads. It was more the colorful markings of Val's mount that caught attention: the colored tassels, the quilted, brightly colored gown, and the multicolored, braided mane.

Suspecting though that anything more than a trot might be beyond the enchanted steed's abilities, and perhaps less than dignified for its rider, Maigraive limited his own, real, horse to a leisurely gait. He wondered if it was truly the hobbyhorse that was enchanted, independent of Val, or if his new friend had a more considerable flair for magic than he knew. Vaughn Earl-Royal had promised to meet them with the animals they would actually be riding on their expedition, but he hadn't said what kind of animals those were. Only that they were the perfect beasts for the job. So, at any rate, Val would not be riding the Rig for the bulk of their journey.

Summer was rapidly showing signs of departure as the man and the crocodilian clopped and glided over the country roads. The wildflowers were still bright, but less exuberantly so. They drooped a bit, as if embarrassed by the fragrant audacity they'd shown just a few weeks prior.

Arriving at last at the designated farmhouse, their mounts for the trip were revealed. Val saw Vaughn Earl-

Royal holding the reins of a huge animal that resembled a giant snail. But it was not a snail; rather it was a sponge. Its roughly textured body was full of deep pocks a foot deep, and thick fissures and irregularities.

The animal was loaded down with rolled tents and packaged supplies and bundles. One end of the sponge was slightly more tapered than the other, and rose a good ten feet above the ground. This was the head of the beast, although the head wasn't any different than the rest of its body. The bridle was wrapped around it here, and as they got closer, Val saw that the sponge was saddled as well. There were two other sponges on the grass in front of a small stable.

"Our desert chariots, Gentlemen!" Earl-Royal announced as they drew near.

Vaughn Earl-Royal was in a fine mood. He greeted them warmly. "Having fun dispatching sleepwalkers, Cassius? He asked, smiling.

"A magnificent sport," Maigraive affirmed. "But, I am ready for other adventures."

"And you shall have them," Earl-Royal promised. "These magnificent animals are sponges. What do you

think of them? They have a mysterious metabolic ability to generate moisture in even the driest climes. Their diet consists of on sand, which they absorb rather than eat. At the same time, they secrete a water-like liquid that is digestible by humans. Perfect animals for a desert expedition!” Val had seen them before from a distance. But he had never ridden one.

Vaughn Earl-Royal walked up to Val and handed him a belted sword.

“Are you expecting danger?” Val asked. The sword surprised him. There typically wasn’t much danger in the desert, for all its isolation. Those who were attracted to life there were not adventurers. They were mostly scholars, artists, monks, aesthetes and peaceful loners. In the cities, desert dwellers were thought of as the biggest pussies you could imagine.

“I’d be quite surprised,” Vaughn Earl-Royal answered. “Still, we will be traveling the off-roads of reality. Let’s project an air of being able to defend ourselves. And, if anything does threaten to cause us harm — we have Maigraive!”

“Indeed,” muttered Maigraive. He wasn’t paying much attention. He was immersed in the intricacies of figuring out how a crocodile should mount a giant sponge.

Vaughn Earl-Royal wore a rapier at his own waist, one with a swept hilt and finely worked scabbard.

Val obliging buckled the sword to his waist, once he’d freed himself of the Rig. He folded the Rig and secured it to the back of the sponge. The upholstered saddle of the sponge was well above the height of his head. But he climbed to it easily when it was time, finding footholds in the pockets and canals of the sponge’s flanks. Val’s boots and breeches were wet by the time he reached the high saddle. The upper portion of the sponge — which brayed complacently as Val found his place on it’s back — was dry and rough. But the lowest portion of it was full of moisture. Maigraive mounted with considerably less ease, but managed the task.

Then Vaughn Earl-Royal took to his saddle, and they were off.

The sponges were bigger than horses, smaller than dragons.

The three rode toward the base of the mountain.

Val had never ridden a sponge, but he knew they were prized for desert travel. The sponges slid on a sheet of self-generated moisture. Beneath the sponges a sparkling wet mist frothed against the soil. The slide of the sponges was smooth and surprisingly swift. They would be going down the opposite side of the mountain that Val had come up. When they reached the foot of the mountain, they would cross the southernmost portion of the desert, and after that, they would travel A.F.O.M., *Away From Other Men*.

Val noted with disappointment that his vision was starting to shift to the right: the slow, shuffling that preceded a vertigo attack. He made up his mind to fend off the episode. It wouldn't bode well to have one, on the very morning of their departure.

He fixed his gaze upon a lone skinny cypress in the distance, jutting up from behind a stony ridge. He mentally 'locked it in.' He willed it to stay in one place and not shift to the side. This worked, sometimes, and when it did, the impending vertigo would pass. If that didn't work, and the cypress started sliding repetitively to the right, he would try to focus on something closer. It was always the things furthest away that spun first.

He was greatly relieved when the feeling passed, and he felt well again.

There were many ways to support oneself in the Periphery. It was a country of travelers, so most towns had an abundance of jobs for transient workers. Times were good, and there was a general air of fortune and opportunity. No one seemed to job-hunt for long. Both Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal were often employed as tutors. Val had a small but steady income from a well-received book he'd written.

We see this illustrated at one of the first stops on the travelers' journey, a cottage publishing house almost lost in a cloud of bright cypresses and aspens.

It was Val's good fortune to have written a book that had become popular in both mountain and desert. It was a collection tales, mostly factual, of his solitary travels in the dunes and what lay beyond them. The publisher had given the book its title: "An Endlight Companion," and since its first pressing Val had enjoyed a reputation as an intrepid traveler and skillful teller of tales. Many of his stories were of things he'd heard, as opposed to done. Val was more a collector of tales than an active protagonist.

A complex wooden press was printing pages as they entered the shop; an earnest-looking man dressed all in knit clothing was turning the wheel. He stopped his work and he and Val exchanged pleasantries. Then without being asked, the man looked up the sum of Val's uncollected royalties and paid him in full.

"Any more manuscripts on the way then, Val?" the publisher inquired. In fact there was.

While Val and the publisher talked, Vaughn Earl-Royal tended to the sponges. The animals were less suited to the high desert than the low, so they would be traveling at a leisurely pace for the first part of the trip. Once they reached the vast low sweep of the desert proper, they would pick up the pace, and the sponges would glide them with great speed over the miles of crystal sand. Maigraive, meanwhile, looked over the display of books the publisher and his crew had recently printed. Stories and tall tales might be the true currency of the Periphery, Maigraive reflected. They were consumed and traded with so much more gusto there than money.

There were scholarly books and treatises on both magic and the sciences. But the passion of the people was fantastic tales, and tales of adventure in imagined places.

Most of the books he inspected were of this sort. Of the most fantastic stories, the chief topic was the greatly avoided city of Whorsnest. Books with lurid covers depicting the horrors of the place offered tales of tragic adventurers who labored in the far-off city of pain. No human author had ever been there, nor had any unfortunate human born in Whorsnest ever made its way out; so the tales were sheer morbid fantasy. No human in the Periphery knew the nature of Whorsnest first-hand, so the stories were apocryphal and made of utter, usually bombastic, speculation. Maigraive was in a unique position in that he had actually been in Whorsnest for a short time. He had emerged from the sewers directly into Whorsnest, as retired crocodilians do. He was aware that most of these crocodilians found the mad city to their taste, and quickly lost themselves in the violent spectacle of its fevered world. Maigraive remembered little of what he had experienced there. But he could attest that it was as horrible as the writers as these writers of pulp fiction imagined. He resisted trying to recollect the details of what he saw there. But he was certain these sensationalist fantasies fell a great deal short of capturing the hellish nature of the real place. The education and interests Maigraive had absorbed in the

sewers had been carefully selected by his proclivity for independence and resistance to group madness. So he had left Whorsnest, which was possible for a non-human, before it consumed him. He'd had no choice but to live and fight in the sewers, but above ground, he asserted his free will while he still had it. He studied the cover of one slim volume with an elaborate cover (*Hell-Pirates of Whorsnest*) before returning it the shelf. He chose another book, and left some small coins on the counter.

An assistant took up the wheel of the printing press and Val and the publisher talked over the clackety-clack of it. "For many years, I have been recording the messages on the travelers' board at desert towns and outposts. I have told you about them: travelers record their experiences, and impressions of things they saw during their trips. They leave notes for friends and tips and clues and warnings.

"Of particular interest to me, however, have been the notes of things *heard* — on the radio broadcasts from the desert radio stations, or during the soundstorms that occur in the wilder places. People jot down words they recall hearing in such a way, the fragments of songs, the names, and bits of stories they can remember. For, yes, the broadcasts and storms are notoriously hard to remember

once one has heard them. But those of us who jot things down have found that we have heard the same things, or things very similar. We see things on the bulletin boards that jog our memories — and as a result whole parts can be realized from what was previously a scattering of fragments.

“What I have tried to do is collect these scattered bits and compile them, in the way musicians have tried to collectively reconstruct songs and compositions from the fleeting signals. I have no musical training, I therefore concentrate on the words and phrases I hear and recall ...

“Of course I would give credit to anyone who asked for it, but most of the postings are anonymous. I’m not aware of any but the most modest attempts to compile them ...”

The publisher nodded slowly. Most people in the cities considered things heard on the desert radio stations to be as valuable as the peculiarities of the sounds that wind makes — that is, not very. But there *was* that niche group Val spoke of who found such esoteric things fascinating. And, there was Vayle Endlight’s already-established reputation ...

“*Recovered Transmissions from the Desert*, we might call it,” Val concluded.

“*Stolen Words and Whispers*,” the publisher said, decisively. “Sounds almost scandalous! Finish your book, and I’ll sic the typesetters on it.”

Two days later they had passed through Witches’ Teeth, and were touring the small, odd villages that were neither mountain nor desert.

When night fell they pitched tents in the spaces between the towns, and dined on the remarkable assortment of foods the Ontologist had packed for their journey.

On the third night of camping, with the last of the real towns far behind them, Vaughn Earl-Royal produced an unusual bottle from one of his bags. It was a tall bottle made of yellow glass. The neck of the bottle had an unusual twist to it. Its cork was a deep shade of red.

Val couldn’t read the label, but there was an elegant symbol etched on the glass. It showed a stylized silhouette of the very creature they’d been riding all day.

“Yes,” the Pale Ontologist said, proud that neither of his companions was familiar with the delicacy he’d

brought to share with them. “The fermented foam of the sponges has a delightful and intoxicating effect on the mind.”

Above them, the Fighters in the Night Sky had risen. Their blocky, star-dotted forms had begun their slow, martial arts movements in the sky. They spun, kicked, and threw slow punches.

Vaughn Earl-Royal and Cassius Maigraive drank, and studied the movements of the Fighters.

Their celestial combat was nothing like the fighting of crocodiles. Crocodile fighting was all clawing and chewing and twisting and scraping. The giant fight in the sky was one of pirouettes and precisely timed blows; it was all grace and power and strategy. Val wished that he too could drink the liquor of the sponges, but its effects were too much like those of alcohol, so he resisted. He took just the tiniest sip. It tasted like black lemons and fireworks.

He was content to enjoy the hashish that he usually carried with him. He had always preferred smoking to drinking. Maigraive declined Val’s pipe when it was offered. No doubt the maneuvers required to smoke from a small pipe would put too many demands on the crocodilian anatomy. But the Pale Ontologist had some puffs, between

sips of the sponge liquor, and, in a short time, the three were settled comfortably on the sand, enjoying their buzzes, beneath the fighting night sky.

The next few days of travel would bring them to the desert, and a few days more would bring them to the A.F.O.M.

Put any three fellows in the desert, traveling for hours through the relatively unchanging scenery and their intoxicants of choice, and secrets are bound to come out.

On their third night of travel, again beneath the spinning, silent blows of the two Fighters, the whole story about Val's dreams of the woman and the birds came out.

Maigraive made an observation that Val was not a quiet sleeper. The anxious look Val gave Maigraive led him to say: "Don't worry, my friend, you don't talk in your sleep, or make embarrassing sounds. But you do toss and turn."

The Pale Ontologist said, casually: "Tell Maigraive what you dream about, Val. Why not? We're all friends."

Again, exposed by Earl-Royal's injudicious tongue! At this rate, Val would have no secrets by the end of the expedition. But he did trust Cassius Maigraive, so he

complied. "I dream of a woman -- almost every night, lately. I have always dreamt of her, but the dreams have changed. She is in some sort of danger now. She is suffering."

"How interesting" Cassius Maigraive said, leaning in.

Val nodded. "I see her in a barren landscape. She lies on some sort of altar. She is menaced by birds that attack her and dig their way under her flesh. I believe this woman truly exists, and that she is a resident of the Sourceworld.

"And I wonder: If she is indeed a resident of the Sourceworld ... and if the signals pulled in by the desert radio stations are signals from the Sourceworld ... might it not be possible to receive 'signals' from this Sourceworldian woman, if I truly put my mind to it? Perhaps I am doing so already, in the crude form of dreams. It is my conviction that she is trying to make contact with me, and has been trying all my life."

"I see," Maigraive said. "But I have always supposed that the signals received and broadcast by the radio stations were random. What you're proposing is a very specific form of contact, in intent, if not actual reception. That is, you believe this woman is manifesting in hopes, conscious or unconscious on her part, of making contact specifically

with you. That is much more than a sensitivity to the presence of a displaced presence originating in the Sourceworld. And, if I am honest, it is much less likely.”

The crocodilian said this with a gentle forthrightness, unlike the more confrontational tone he took when he bantered philosophically with Vaughn Earl-Royal.

The Pale Ontologist shared Maigraive’s skepticism. He did believe that there was something about Val’s dreams of this woman that distinguished them from the usual dreaming.

And there were plenty of people who subscribed to the notion of star-crossed lovers, born in the Sourceworld, and destined to reunite in the Periphery. Vaughn Earl-Royal wasn’t one of them. Residents of the Sourceworld — which he definitely believed in — might have some vague personal connection to certain residents of the Periphery. But if they did, it was a loose connection with even looser influence, perhaps like the vague push and pull of the Zodiac. What Val was proposing was a romantic illusion, caused by the commonality of images pulled into their world from the DreamSuck, which swirled between the two worlds of the Sourceworld and the Periphery.

He did not discourage Val's insistence on his connection to this woman being more than that, but privately, he put no stock in it.

Cassius Maigraive had his own theory about links between the Sourceworld and the Periphery, and he shared it now with Val. "Some believe that people on the Sourceworld connect to our world through a desire to escape suffering they experience in their own. Some scholars believe that our own world has less metaphysical restrictions than the Sourceworld, and the residents of our world experience less suffering. Perhaps this is the case with the woman in your dreams."

Val nodded, glad that Maigraive had not dismissed the topic as mere fantasy.

"There may be something to that. But I have seen her in my dreams since I was a boy. And she is only suffering in the dreams I've had lately. She has aged along with me over the years — I have not mentioned that I originally saw her as a little girl. However much she seems to suffer now, this was not always so.

There was another aspect to the dreams of the woman and that birds that complicated things, and Val explained it to Maigraive.

The woman in his dreams submitted to the birds without resisting. She suffered, surely — there was no doubt of that. But she endured their torments as a participant rather than victim. The dreams he'd had lately left vague recollections of the woman guided to the dais by hooded figures. But they did not compel her. She did not struggle as they laid her down, as they fastened her arms and legs to the smooth white table. When the birds came, she kept still as they landed, and began their savage burrowing. There was blood, yes, but not as much as one might expect. They went in beak first, under the skin, and the flesh sealed up tight again behind them.

"So there may be truth to your theory. There may be truth to that. Suffering, or a need to escape it, could indeed forge connections between worlds. But the consistent presence of this woman in my dreams throughout my life convinces me that this is more than just the singular catching of a random signal. It convinces me there is a connection between this woman and I, wherever she is, and that the connection is personal rather than general."

Vaughn Earl-Royal had stayed out of the conversation. At this point though, he broke his silence and said: "Val, you've come this far in your 'confession.' You

may as well go all the way. Tell Maigraive what connection you believe you and this woman have.”

Val did not mind Vaughn Earl-Royal’s coaxing at this point. He found that he wanted Maigraive to know the whole story, and even, eventually, to believe it.

Val said “I believe that, in a way I cannot even pretend to explain ... this otherworldly woman is my wife.”

The expedition continued the next morning.

This was the longest part of the trip, and modest in incident. The three abandoned conversation. It was hard to hear each other over the sliding of the sponges over rough sand; and the desert heat lent itself to inward, shaded thoughts. Val contemplated his radio station, in fact he strove to build it, imagining towers and antennas in his mind, and planting them deep in the far-flung reaches of his psyche. He conceived them in great detail, and oversaw them plunging from the sky and planting themselves deep in the red soil of his mind. He even listened for signals. What he got however was ... HISSS, from the left. BURRR, from the right.

Our three travelers followed rivers, labored up mountain trails, enjoyed the occasional grand vista, and so on. They traveled in silence, and Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal concentrated on maneuvering their trip into the realm of the A.F.O.M.

So let us take the time, leaving them to their thoughts, to explore more fully the world in which they live, and the hypothetical geography of their cosmos.

The geography of the flat, endless world of our three travelers was generally agreed upon. The center of everything was the awful, locked city of Whorsnest. Around Whorsnest were the mountains, and then the deserts and transient oceans, of what was called the Periphery. The Periphery was a Big Bang of uncharted territories, expanding constantly in all directions, leading to who knows where.

One might wonder why Whorsnest, that bloated urban boil of perpetual suffering was considered the center of things. Was it because it sat squarely atop the DreamSuck? Why were the expanding outer lands considered “peripheral,” rather than central, with Whorsnest being little more than a boil on its ever-widening, topographical derriere. Who knows? The

conception was ancient, and all the philosophers and magicians adhered to it. So, unless our narrative leads us to think otherwise, let's adhere to it to as well, and be thankful we follow our heroes away from Whorsnest, rather than towards it.

As for Whorsnest: It is a mad city of prisoners and wardens, the difference between them being nothing more than the severity of their madness. Some reveled in the chaos of the inescapable place. Others endured tortured lives there, reflected in the colossal screaming face of brick and metal that rose above its rooftops and towers. Anything human born within Whorsnest was doomed to stay there. Would-be escapees burst into colorful clouds of exploded corporality upon breaching the borders of the cursed place. There were tales of exceptions, who escaped the city and got out alive. But these were only legends, the stuff of children's stories and fantastic novels.

Likewise, it was impossible for a human mortal to enter Whorsnest. Doing so would be the equivalent of entering an inferno. The flesh would burn from one's bones if one just barely approached its borders.

Miles beneath Whorsnest, was the labyrinth of ancient plumbing that led to the sewers, where the crocodilians fought their ceaseless, senseless war.

Lower still was the swirling fog of the DreamSuck, where the nightmares and fevered ambitions of the Sourceworld were said to swirl in fitful fragments. There were those that thought the dreams of people in the Periphery swirled in the DreamSuck as well.

Some thought the DreamSuck was where those mysterious desert radio stations trawled for signals, which they broadcast, for unknown purposes, over the dunes. No one knew for sure where the radio stations got their signals. But what *was* certain was that the worst of what floated in the DreamSuck, the real psychic garbage in it, was pulled up through those miles of rusted pipes and twisted plumbing under Whorsnest, to feed the crazed city and be the very engine of its madness.

The temperature was rising steadily as the three travelers headed deeper into the desert. The desert was not a comfortable place for a crocodilian. Unlike the sponges, Cassius Maigraive could not internally generate moisture.

Dry by nature, the crocodilian's slow metabolism dictated a close proximity to bodies of water.

Thus it was that Val observed, many times, Maigraive strip down to the waist and lean back far into the moist flesh of the Sponges. He sunk into their wetness, soaking up what was not water, but did contain a good deal of it. Val realized that this was, perhaps, why Vaughn Earl-Royal had chosen the exotic mounts for their trip into the desert.

This practice of Maigraive's also afforded Val the opportunity to see, firsthand, the legacy of Maigraive's long years in the sewers. The tough, scaly skin to either side of his abdomen had been clawed into jagged troughs of torn flesh.

"A soldier's medals!" Maigraive cried good naturedly, when he noticed Val looking.

The appeal of the desert, for Val, had always been the mysterious radio stations. In the desert, Val was able to pick up their sporadic but fascinating transmissions. But while in the company of his companions, this would not be possible. Listening to the revenant broadcasts was a solitary art. Perhaps it was faulty reception produced by a group of companions, as opposed to just one, that made radio

reception impossible among groups or even duos. In any case, one could only hear the stations when alone.

The curious thing was that it was also evident independent listeners heard the same things. This was borne out by the messages and listeners' logs people left on the boards that Val copied things down from. He saw recurring phrases and matching lines from songs travelers had heard. The radio signals were not merely the private products of a single mind, unheard by anyone but the one who heard them in their solitude.

A physical device — a radio — helped travelers tune in the stations. Val carried several small radios with him at all times. But the receiving mechanism for radio transmissions in the desert was actually the listener's mind. The radio itself was more a way of focusing the listener on the *idea* of receiving the radio signals. The physical radios had no components that would actually make them work in terms of the 'real world.' It was similar to the horseless carriages one saw from time to time in the cities. The idea of them had been pulled from the Sourceworld, far in advance of any mechanical knowledge of how to make a four-wheeled contraption move without an animal pulling it. But run they did, if the driver had enough psychic

gumption to turn their wheels. Some contained faux engines, but these rarely had moving parts, or any practical connection to the rest of the vehicle.

Vaughn Earl-Royal, his sponge gliding along on the fizzling spume from its underbelly, was riding slightly ahead of the other two.

He consulted the map. He folded it after a few moments study, but not to put it away. Maps that addressed the shifting topography of A.F.O.M. regions required folding to be read correctly. It was an art in itself to read such maps. The skill demanded of a mapmaker was considerable, and required unbelievable amounts of calculation and planning. The reading of a finished map demanded nearly as much skill. It demanded a sort of cartographical origami on the part of the reader; folding the map precisely, then holding it up to the light so that the folded sections were illuminated, overlapped, in new, layered arrangements.

Vaughn Earl-Royal could have provided a copy of the map to Val and Cassius, but it would have been quite useless to them, once they'd entered the A.F.O.M.

Vaughn Earl-Royal held the map up high so that the sun's rays poured through it. He was not particularly dressed for desert travel. His long-sleeved, royal blue tunic blazed in the light and the gold brocade of its cuffs sparkled. His cape was more decorative than practical: too light to provide warmth in the cold desert nights, and too flimsy to provide any shade during the day.

It was to be expected, thought Val. No comforts were worth paying the price of being unfashionable to Vaughn Earl-Royal.

When traveling A.F.O.M., the traveler had not left the Periphery for another place or dimension. They were only traveling a thin, barely accessible aspect of the ordinary world. It was a change of *perspective*. Thus, they saw recognizable features of their world that any ordinary traveler might see.

For example: "Look, gentlemen!" Earl-Royal said, pointing south. "See those glimmers at the horizon, extending up to the sky?"

They looked and caught the distant sparkles.

"The Vertical Sea," Vaughn Earl-Royal announced. They were a great distance from it, but the Vertical Sea was discernible from their position. An ocean at a 90-degree

angle to the regular world, tipped sideways, yet keeping its blue waters, rather than spilling them, as a waterfall would. Val hoped their expedition would take them closer to it, but the Pale Ontologist said no, they were heading in another direction. “Another time, perhaps.”

Traveling the A.F.O.M. was to step into a complex network of invisible gears and trajectories that moved time around as well as places. Both Time and Space traveled in interlocking orbits, beyond the comprehension of most humans, but supposedly within the grasp of some of the many non-human creatures that lived in the Periphery. The maps that Val bought as often as he could while traveling could be traced back to non-human hands, if they made mention of the A.F.O.M. The regular dimensions of the Periphery were always changing too, and Time could never be counted on to behave. But an A.F.O.M. expedition was a whole other level.

Traveling A.F.O.M. had the benefit of releasing travelers from the restricting gravity of normal men and women. It produced a stage of sorts where uncommon acts could be performed. It contained the routes and roadways of magicians, and those who sought fantastic returns on their endeavors.

The A.F.O.M. — an acronym for “*Away From Other Men*” — had a built-in resistance to travelers crossing paths. Two parties might explore the same small area of an A.F.O.M. territory for months, and never even catch sight of each other. In this way, it was a very safe area to explore, as far as worries about danger or interference from others. In the same way however, it was unlucky to need assistance if one ran into trouble in an A.F.O.M. territory. If lost, no one would ever find you. If injured, no Good Samaritan would come to your aid.

Not many maps detailed A.F.O.M. topography. Some indicated entrance and exit points in relation to normal Peripheral locations. Most didn’t acknowledge A.F.O.M. directions at all. Vaughn Earl-Royal must have spent a great deal for these maps he had, and used his connections to find cartographers who could make them. Their calculations might not be valid for more than a few months, but it was necessary to engage in the sort of travel they had in mind. The fact was that every human born in the periphery was wired for A.F.O.M. travel. But it was a certain skill, a certain attention that only a small number of humans would ever achieve. It demanded practice and a great assertion of the will to do it. Both Val and Vaughn

had developed that skill. These are uncommon men who we're following vicariously here.

Maigraive, a crocodilian, was not wired for the A.F.O.M., but was being carried there by the attentions of Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal. He was there by virtue of his connection to them. Cut off from them, he would find himself alone, perhaps confused, in the day-to-day sands of the Periphery. He would be intact, unharmed. But the memory of his A.F.O.M. time with them would be at best like a dream to him, and he would soon forget whatever he did there. The same in fact would happen to Val and Vaughn, if they returned to the regular topography of the Periphery in any way other than a bona fide exit point. This was the great value of the maps.

Inside the mental dashboard of Val's mind, the A.F.O.M. was like a lit-up zodiac of lines and directions.

They were traveling in a place of red rocks, and strangely shaped hills and trenches. Over their heads, bizarrely shaped sandstone formations, sculpted by the winds, rose tall. These hoodoos were the colors of scarlet, of rust, of bleached white earth, and smoky crimson. They passed the man-made columns of the Three Crones, their

ancient faces sculpted by men centuries before. They followed the custom of breaking three bottles of good wine at the base of the giant sisters as they passed.

By nightfall, they had left the regular world, and were deep into the A.F.O.M. They sat around a small fire, made from kindling Vaughn Earl-Royal had gathered in the mountains. The sponges brayed and murmured quietly.

Maigraive produced a small book from the pocket of his suit coat. “I’ve been enjoying your “Endlight Companion,” Val. I picked a copy up in Barrelslee. Excellent reading!”

Val felt that flush of satisfaction and embarrassment he experienced whenever someone said they’d read his book.

“I’m glad you like it, Cassius.”

“I do. Its “companionship” is not as gratifying as that of the author’s in person, but it is very entertaining. Perhaps I can ask you about something that puzzles me, though ... about authorship in general. I fully understand the pleasure of reading a book. But what pleasure does one get from writing one?”

Val considered. “I suppose it might be similar to the pleasure you get from telling your jokes, or inflicting those awful puns of yours on the unsuspecting.”

Maigraive chuckled. “Still, jokes and puns flow easily from the mind, and roll even easier off the tongue. A book, I imagine, is hard work.”

That is true, thought Val, and he wondered if defining the motivations to write one might be hard work as well. He thought for a moment. Then he said: “A good book almost demands to be written. It sits in one, nagging, filling one’s brain with unasked for sentences and phrases. They fill the head. A book is constantly inside the author, just behind the eyes — processing and reshaping every experience into prose. The book becomes a vague but demanding puzzle that the author becomes obsessed with solving.”

The crocodilian nodded. Val had his full attention. “It is, however, more than that. It is a by-product of the true excitement of life that it is the author’s privilege to feel. It is the spilling over of lived experience into shared experience, driven by the sheer generosity of life. The electricity of it!”

Maigraive nodded slowly. He'd never considered life a privilege, or contemplated the 'electricity' of it, before. Certainly, he had enjoyed the earthy pleasures he found in the Periphery, after emerging from the sewers. But he had never stopped thinking of "life" — when he thought about it at all — as anything but a struggle for survival.

As Val finished his explanation, Cassius Maigraive felt again that unexpected twang of friendship that he'd only experienced for a few people since joining the surface dwellers. He felt it for Vaughn Earl-Royal. But what he felt for Val, this openhearted, worried young man, so full of zeal for the "electricity" of his existence, went deeper.

It was notable that he felt friendship for anyone at all. Affection, love, camaraderie — these were not part of the crocodilian world. The crocodile soldiers fought for themselves and themselves only, not out of devotion to anyone. It was just in them to fight, and fight they did. True, they spent their years of combat alternately killing and entertaining each other. Packed mercilessly tight in the tunnels, whole years could pass before they could effectively bite or claw or strangle soldiers only inches away from them. And they did get to know each other, a bit.

During these times of stalemate, they told stories, and traded jokes, and made their awful puns.

It was only in retrospect now, in retirement, that Maigraive realized that none of it had been the equivalent of true discourse here on the surface. It was the clanging together of empty cans; it was the hollow bumpings of boats tied to the dock. It was not communication. No crocodilian ever got delight or satisfaction from the telling of a tale to another, or the landing of a successful bon mot. No, they only lived for the dim flash of sensation they felt when spoken to. Their talk in the sewers did not inspire thought or soothe real curiosity; it only filled the tiny interstices between them in those soldier-packed tunnels, and kept them alive in the crudest of ways. And no friendships were made. A crocodilian might trade stories with another soldier for years, only to claw that companion's eye out the second there was an opening, caused by a shift of a scaly limb, or the sudden devouring of an unseen enemy, somewhere above or below them.

It was only in the dimly remembered fog of old age that a crocodilian began to think its thoughts, rather than merely experience them. In that dreamlike, irresistible climb that slowly replaced the endless war they were born

into, they would slide their way upward, confronted by the thoughts and ideas they had absorbed and regurgitated through the bloody decades below, and become the creatures that broke through into the surface world as sentient beings.

It was always Whorsnest these warriors came up in. And most of them stayed there. They replaced the madness of the world below with the madness of the Screaming City above, feeling at home with its violence and its byzantine nest of hostile intrigues. But Maigraive had not found his place there. Though he was uncomfortable, too, among these smooth-skinned denizens of the Periphery, he felt more compatible with them than the damned souls of Whorsnest. Unlike a human being, he could leave the place, without dying and blowing away on the winds outside it.

And now, here he was, traveling with two men he could consider friends, and one who in particular he felt a marked dedication to. For him, it was the strangest part of their expedition.

It is doubtful that Val grasped the significance, and novelty, of the retired crocodilian's affection. As he expounded on the motives for writing books, in the back of his mind, Val had been wondering where Vaughn Earl-

Royal was. Each of them had taken turns wandering off during the trip for moments of privacy. But Earl-Royal had been gone for some time, and Val had started to feel uneasy about it.

He left Maigraive and walked alone beneath the slow, distorted movements of the Fighters in the Night Sky. They swirled and kicked lazily above him. Their movements were different when viewed from the A.F.O.M.

Val, Cassius and Vaughn Earl-Royal had entered a territory of deep sandstone trenches. They had guided the snails through passages deeper than the height of the sponges, and at times, just barely as wide. It made it impossible to see very far in any direction, and Val felt claustrophobic and uncomfortable. Finding Earl-Royal should have been easy; he wouldn't have gone far. But the depth and twist of the trenches made it into a puzzle. He called out for him several times and got no answer. Could Vaughn be lost? He doubted it. Earl-Royal had been traveling the deserts and the A.F.O.M. since he was a boy. It was hard to imagine him losing his way, even in a landscape such as this.

Then, turning a corner, Val came upon a strange and disturbing scene. At first he saw only Vaughn Earl-Royal, seated awkwardly on a large stone. But there was something else too, hard to lay eyes upon and harder to register in the mind.

Crouching in front of Vaughn Earl-Royal was a dark, humanoid shape, a foot or two taller than a man. It was bonier than a man, too, and its limbs were crooked and long. Val recognized the dim, patchy texture of the phantom right away — it was like that of the sleepwalkers he'd seen in the city with Maigraive. But what sort of dreamer was this? Clearly, it was not human.

Earl-Royal, sitting on the stone, was leaning back against the wall of the stony chasm. His eyes were open, but dull. His expression betrayed no emotion. Nor did he register any recognition of Val when he appeared behind the grotesque sleepwalker.

The sleepwalker heard him, though, or at least it sensed his presence. It spun backwards to face him with none of the listless demeanor of the human sleepwalkers he'd seen in Barrelslee. Its face was a jagged vacuum of open mouth and tormented shadow. There was no mistaking its malevolence. Unlike the naked sleepwalkers

Maigraive had stalked in Barrelslee, Val had the impression that this sleepwalker wore ash-colored robes, and that its long arms were covered with coarse hair. But the most startling difference between this sleepwalker and the others was that it was carrying a longsword.

Val stepped back, making an embarrassing sort of ‘*glurk*’ sound from the base of his throat. He grabbed at the hilt of the sword Earl-Royal insisted he wear, but he failed to slide it out of its sheath before the creature was upon him, with its own weapon.

It would have sliced him in two, if not for Maigraive. Maigraive sprang from the narrow mouth of the trench’s entrance, and landed between Val and the sleepwalker. Before his booted feet had fully hit the dry earth, Maigraive swung his own sword in a fearsome sidelong arc that decapitated the menacing creature.

Val watched as Maigraive finished the kill in the same manner he’d taken out the human sleepwalkers: hack, hack, chop, chop. Vaughn Earl-Royal sat on the rock the whole time, dazed and indifferent to the carnage. Maigraive turned to Val, covered in grey blood, once the ruined carcass began to disintegrate. Val had recovered his composure.

“What in hell do you suppose *that* was?” he breathed.

“Perhaps the Ontologist can help with that,” Maigraive proposed.

“We may have to help him first,” Val said. “Look at him. Like he’s in a trance.”

They were already walking over to him, calling his name. “Ontologist, what’s wrong with you?” “Are you hurt, man?”

They found Earl-Royal intact, but they had to shake him several times before he snapped out of whatever spell he was under.

The three companions sat in silence as Vaughn Earl-Royal collected himself. But after some time, Maigraive demanded an explanation.

"Ontologist, what is going on here? This expedition, and now things that preceded it, as I think further -- I feel Val and I have been duped."

"Indeed you have, and I apologize," Earl-Royal replied. "For I have indeed been misleading you from the start. It was not my wish to do so. The true architect of this expedition, and of my betrayal of my two closest friends,

was that inky parasite you just killed. And congratulations on doing so, for it has been my hope all along, Maigraive, that either you or Val would do it. For I was utterly helpless in the demon's grip."

"A demon had hold of you?"

"Demon?" Val said. "A demon of what sort?" For there were many types of demons in the Periphery.

The Ontologist looked up finally and locked eyes with Endlight. "The sort that escapes from Whorsnest."

"Whorsnest?" the crocodile said. "Impossible! There's no leaving Whorsnest, even for the most powerful devil that dwells there! You know that!"

Val nodded. "It is the rule, Vaughn."

"It has been the rule," Earl-Royal admitted. "But of late there have been exceptions to that rule."

"You're saying that you were possessed by a demon from Whorsnest? One that dictated your arringing this expedition."

"That is exactly what I am saying."

Maigraive said: "When I cut that thing down ... I was reminded immediately of those sleepwalkers you set me on back in Barrelslee. This 'demon' of yours was obviously more vital than those shady wretches I hunted for sport

those nights ... but it had a certain smell to it, and it was just like the smell of those sleepwalkers."

"It's the stink of Whorsnest."

"The sleepwalkers also escaped from Whorsnest."

"They did not escape. They were launched here against their will. The most powerful demons of Whorsnest have been developing a way to escape the city and influence events in the outside world. They used the tortured, lesser souls of Barrelslee as test subjects, while they developed an experimental mechanism for launching the consciousness of demons beyond the walls of Whorsnest. The sleepwalkers you killed suffered as much in our world as they did in their own. You saw them: pathetic, half-formed, creatures. They couldn't take the intensity of the displacement..

When the demon had of hold me, I was privy to some of its thoughts and its knowledge of things. I learned of this program they were involved in. I learned that the presence of the sleepwalkers was small in comparison to what the higher demons could do with it, but the corrosive effect of their collective presence in the Periphery would gradually deteriorate the barrier between their realm and our own.

But their goal is making the Periphery accessible to the most powerful demons of Whorsnest. This is what they are working toward. For now, they have the ability to hide in human hosts in the Periphery, using them as an anchor for their manifestation until they are able to conduct themselves as independent entities.

Earl-Royal was looking like himself again. He leaned forward conspiratorially, as he did when he had a tale to tell.

“I sat in the Musetoreum, very late one night, poring over documents I’d acquired after a long search. The documents had to do with the Desert Mummies. One section had a partial list of films made by the Mummies. Apparently, an entire series of short films had been made about Pin-Uthra and his remarkable exodus from the pestilent city. There was a list naming the title of each installment in the series. I was enthralled.

Then there was a sudden burst of heat in the room, followed by an equally sudden, death-like, chill. I looked up from my documents, and saw the demon sleepwalker, standing on the other side of my worktable. It said nothing.

It was mostly made of shadow, but its presence was unmistakable.

It had a sword — a black, oily-looking longsword. Before I could move, the demon ran me through with it, pinning me to the back of my chair. As it withdrew the blade, I remained fully conscious and fully stuck to the chair, for while it appeared ghostly, the creature's sword was as physical as anything else in the room. Then the demon began whacking away at me with the freed blade, in the same manner that I instructed you to whack away at the sleepwalkers in Barrelslee, Maigraive.

I believe this over-the-top dismembering is a sort of compensation for the murderous act being done on an astral, rather than physical, plane. An astral form must try harder to destroy a physical one. At any rate, the demon chopped me into jelly. But aside from the initial shock, I felt no real pain, and my thoughts remained clear and consistent. I remained in my chair, full in body and mind. My dismemberment, though, took some time, and I became, in fact, a little bored by the process, before it was completed to the demon's satisfaction."

"At this point, I either fell asleep, or lost consciousness by some other means. During this time, I

am convinced the demon familiarized itself with me in both body and mind, and installed itself at the back of my consciousness. In its own body, in the infernal, urban pustule that is Whorsnest, the demon was sleeping as it took me. When the demon woke, I was once again — superficially — my normal self. But the demon sleepwalker continued to guide my actions, and somehow it restricted me from doing anything to remedy my situation, or tell anyone about it.

In the weeks that followed, it laid the groundwork for this very expedition. It led me to gather information in the right places. It funneled voices from unrevealed sources into my head. Finally, it dictated the map we have followed since we left Barrelslee.

The sleepwalker has hung behind me all this time, perverting actions I would normally have enjoyed, by making them the fulfillment of desires of its own. When the demon sleeps, it is strongest in my consciousness. Physically, it is trapped in Whorsnest, as has always been the rule. Astrally, as a ‘sleepwalker,’ it cannot operate on its own, away from its wretched home in Whorsnest. That was the reason for my possession.

The goal of our expedition is as I told you — with one exception. You see, Pin-Uthra meant as much to the demon that possessed me as it does to me, in my unmolested frame of mind — The story of Pin-Uthra, and his miraculous escape! The goal of the expedition coincided with my own interest, but it was the demon that truly initiated this quest. It was my own passion for the story of Pin-Uthra that led it to me, and allowed it to so effectively take control of my mind.

Val, you discovered the creature beginning its grisly work of ‘killing’ me for the umpteenth time since it appeared in my study at the Musetoreum. It did this to cement its hold on me, as we traveled even further from Whorsnest, its center of influence. Maigraive killed the creature, as I hoped one of you would, if you accompanied me into the wilderness. My thanks, for sniffing out its presence and neutralizing the thing.”

“You could not tell of your possession, but you were hoping, as you invited us, that we would figure out your predicament during the expedition, and remedy the situation,” Val said.

“Yes,” the Ontologist confirmed. “You and Maigraive are the most intrepid and reliable of all my friends. I was confident that you could save me.”

The sleepwalking demon had overestimated its ability to possess Earl-Royal as the journey took them farther and farther from Whorsnest. It had allowed Earl-Royal to assemble a team for the expedition, for the demon realized that it was a task for more than one man. It did not guess the reason behind Earl-Royal’s confidence in the two friends he had chosen, that they would see through Earl-Royal’s deception and realize the true plot.

Now, the demon was vanquished. But the map, transcribed by Earl-Royal during his possession, by dictation of the demon, still led to the goal that the Pale Ontologist had described from the beginning. They could still find the spheres, and claim them for themselves (well, mostly for the Ontologist, who was the big Pin-Uthra fan). It was the Ontologist, naturally, who suggested they continue the expedition and do just that.

Maigraive frowned. “Even if it’s as you say, and a dreaming demon found its way out of Whorsnest ... Why would it be so interested in props from an ancient motion picture serial.”

“The thing is, Maigraive, the spheres are not props. They are the actual things themselves!”

“What?” said Maigraive. “The “actual balls” of Pin-Uthra? I thought Pin-Uthra was merely a legend! A mythical person ... like Pinapplio.”

The Pale Ontologist shook his head. “I was never certain myself. Until that demon sleepwalker possessed me. Pin-Uthra was real, and so were the magic spheres he used during his exodus! That’s what that demon was after!

“And, if they did indeed belong to a wizard like Pin-Uthra, they are a relic of truly ancient magic, which everyone agreed was prodigious, compared to our own. Who knows what we can do, if we retrieve them?”

III

The Balls of Pin-Uthra

“So, just how big are this wizard’s balls?” Maigraive asked cheerfully.

Val groaned. This had to be the hundredth “balls” double entendre he had heard in the last two days.

“I’m serious, Ontologist,” Maigraive insisted. “There are only three of us, and you say the wizard’s balls are hidden in a system of subterranean tunnels. How will we retrieve them, if they weigh, say, hundreds of pounds?”

“We’re quite prepared, Maigraive,” answered the Pale Ontologist. “I’ve brought harnesses and pulleys, if we need them. And the sponges are incredibly strong. But, actually — I know this from the recollected thoughts of my unwanted guest — they are thought to weigh less than a soap bubble.”

“Preposterous!” Maigraive exclaimed.

“That’s sorcery for you,” Earl-Royal answered.

“But you’ve speculated they are containers,” the crocodilian continued. “What could they contain, and yet remain so light?”

“Spells, I’m thinking.”

"More nonsense. If we’re successful, we'll find some pretty new exhibits for your Musetoreum. At best."

The following days were filled with “balls” jokes from Maigraive. Val got tired of them right away, which only seemed to make them more fun for Maigraive.

But eventually they and all his other puns and jokes stopped. It was hot, and growing hotter as they neared their destination.

“Are you alright, Cassius?” Val called over from his sponge.

“Earl-Royal might have told us he was leading us into an inferno when he proposed this adventure,” Maigraive answered.

At this point in the journey, none of the three were feeling very well. Vaughn Earl-Royal was still drained from his recent possession by a sleepwalking demon. And Val’s tinnitus had grown more loud and distracting than ever. He was nearly deaf in the right ear, and his sense of balance was off.

But the crocodilian was dangerously dry.

They persevered. Vaughn Earl-Royal's map showed that they were close to their destination. After another day of riding, they could see the weirdly formed mountain mass they'd come for.

"There are tunnels beneath those mountains, and in those tunnels are the balls of Pin-Uthra," the Pale Ontologist announced. Val braced himself for another 'balls' joke from Maigraive. But none came.

Maigraive looked very bad. His skin, always crusty, had ossified to the point where it seemed he might crumble. Stripped down to the waist, he maintained his place on the high saddle with difficulty.

"Perhaps we should set up camp here and rest before we continue," Val suggested.

"Nonsense," the crocodilian huffed. "At the tunnels there will be shade. I'd rather revive myself there than here, in this infernal, cloudless heat."

So it was. They pressed on. Vaughn Earl-Royal's map proved reliable. Between it and his three-faced variable compass, they found the opening to the tunnels late in the day.

Maigraive slid painfully down from the sponge. Even the sponge was dry, in its upper body.

But its lower flanks were still wet from the liquid spume it propelled itself over the desert sand with.

Maigraive took a big gulp of air and sank backwards into the animal. Liquid oozed out around the heavy crocodilian, but not as much as had done earlier, at the beginning of their quest.

“Let’s gather the sponges around Cassius”, Val said.

“Excellent idea,” the Ontologist agreed. They tied the animals close together, sandwiching Maigraive between their moist, massive sides. Maigraive nodded vaguely, and closed his eyes. He became quite still.

“Alright, then. Val, Maigraive’s in bad shape. I hadn’t counted on things getting so hot. I may have asked too much of him. But I’m thinking — if *you’re* up to it — you and I can fetch the spheres from the tunnels. The tunnels are vast and confusing, but the spheres are not too far inside them. We can let Maigraive recuperate here, and have them already hitched up to the sponges when he’s ready to travel again.”

It seemed like a reasonable plan. They had no reason to expect resistance in the tunnels — they hadn’t seen

another living thing in the last two days, and the map indicated no settlements or occupations anywhere in the area. They were in a true no-man's-land, and as far as they knew that negation applied to other creatures as well. Besides, in his present condition, Maigraive would be less help than hindrance if they had to defend themselves.

They would have to hope that Vaughn Earl-Royal's certainty that, for all their size, the spheres were incredibly light, was correct. "Remember the poster you saw at my shop?" Earl-Royal had said to Val. "The spheres are shown as light enough to be pushed along by a pack of dogs."

"They may not have been ordinary dogs," Val cautioned. (And he was pretty sure the "dogs" part of the story was apocryphal.)

"You worry too much! And, if our treasure is indeed too cumbersome to move once we find it, we will abandon the plan and come back later with the sponges, and the harnesses I've designed to pull the balls back with."

Val nodded. He imagined that it would come to exactly that, especially since they were unsure of exactly how many of the spherical containers there were. (Val had fallen into the habit of calling them 'spherical containers', to discourage more tiresome wordplay from Maigraive.)

But the possibility of finding the spherical containers while his suffering friend rested seemed worth pursuing. Val himself wasn't tired, although he did have to fight off a sudden wave of dizziness when he dismounted from his sponge.

They told their intention to the crocodilian. He nodded and waved them away, half-sleeping in the seeping, frothy liquid pooling between the bodies of the gathered sponges.

Leaving Maigraive and the sponges inside the wide mouth of the cave, Val and Vaughn Earl-Royal headed into its tunneled insides. The antechamber tapered into one small tunnel as predicted by the map. Their lanterns were unnecessary as they continued deeper, due to a slight phosphorescence of the tunnel walls.

They came to an inner chamber where the ceiling grew nearer but the tunnel expanded outward on either side, as if they had been traveling down the stem of the letter "I" and had hit the horizontal crux. The tunnel wall in front of them was perforated by holes which were perhaps three times the size of a man. They counted ten of the holes, which were the mouths of other tunnels, again as

predicted by the map. They located the tunnel they should go through, and found its walls were full of more holes, more tunnels. They were certain the other tunnels looked much the same way.

Without the map, they could have been lost forever in this maze. They pressed on in the gloom. The ceiling and floor of the tunnel they were in followed the shape of its circular entrance, so they walked not on a flat surface but a curved one. The ceiling above them mirrored the curve of the stony floor. As they walked, the circular tunnel entrances they passed lost all sense of perspective in the gloom, and they seemed to be walking in a grey landscape of circles. The curved floor made it hard to walk with certainty, and Val found his tinnitus starting to roar, his head starting to spin.

Vaughn Earl-Royal was counting the tunnel entrances staring hard at the map. Val said: “This is more disorienting than anticipated, don't you think? Perhaps we should rejoin Maigraive before we get in too deep.”

“Bear up, man. Yes, it's awful in here, but we haven't far to go. These tunnels are the shortest leg of our trip. Once Pin-Uthra had made the Periphery, and continued ‘past’ it into A.F.O.M. territory, he didn't need to hide his

treasure too carefully. It was well beyond the reach of those he left behind in Whorsnest.”

Vaughn Earl-Royal was walking faster than Val cared for, and making quick decisions. Right, left, right again. Some of the tubes — for that is most like what they were now — were only ten or fifteen feet long, some twisted along further, and took turns that led them up, then down again.

“But this place!” Val insisted, rather desperately. “It’s enough to drive one mad!”

“Of course! A fitting place for a wizard to store his valuables! Although I daresay the intricacies of this place are not the work of sorcery. Rather, that of parasites. Huge, slug-like animals, that chewed these tunnels out of the rock!”

“Parasites?”

“Yes! But don’t worry, my friend! They are long extinct. We might thank them, though. The walls owe their phosphorescence to the slime of these creatures’ bodies. The traces of them, sliding their big, gelatinous bodies through the spaces their gnawing made in the stone!”

Vaughn Earl-Royal’s voice had taken on a wild, buzzing tone. Or was it Val’s ears that made it seem so?

“I beg of you, Vaughn. A moment’s pause ...”

“You’re made of heartier stock than this, Val! Let’s press on a bit further! Tally Ho!”

“Vaughn, it’s ... the vertigo. My ears ... An attack ...”

It was true. Val’s vision was becoming a sea of spinning circles. Vaughn Earl-Royal was farther ahead now. To the left. Or, was it the right —

“Buck up, man! Concentrate!” Vaughn’s voice was far off and tinny.

The circles spun faster. Val lost his footing and stumbled forward. Was Vaughn Earl-Royal passion to find these treasure so great, to be so uncharacteristically blind to his distress?

“Please, Vaughn, I can’t continue ...”

The floor, or was it the ceiling? swung upward at him. He felt his body hit hard against stone. Another spin.

“Stop,” he gasped, tucking his face in his crooked arm. The spinning didn’t stop when he closed his eyes. The spinning was inside him. He was hot, and needing to vomit. He called again for Earl-Royal, but there was no reply. He heard only the roar of his tinnitus. Had Vaughn Earl-Royal left him here?

He'd been abandoned. It almost didn't matter. He only wanted to be still, and try to separate himself from the spinning. He pretended he was just a small still thing, watching the spinning from afar. It wasn't working. He rotated his hand in a vague, helpless gesture.

An unfortunate effect of prolonged vertigo is it makes your thoughts seem to spin, too. Parasites, phosphorescent slime ... it was impossible to keep in mental focus, all was a nauseating swirl of chopped up thoughts and images.

He wanted to be no one, so no one would be there to spin. He wanted to escape the spinning and fall asleep, and eventually he did.

In his troubled sleep, Val saw the Periphery from above, he soared above the dunes and great expanses of it. He saw steep spires rising from the sand: they were radio towers. Spidery constructions reaching up to the sky, as if to scratch the bottom of the Elevated Planes, which floated high above the Periphery. The strange, spiraling towers snagged at a turbulent sea of something, not made of matter, but not imagined either: radio waves.

He was not free of the spinning, though, even in these visions. He could not focus on what he saw. He searched for his own imaginary radio tower among these steely giants of cable and wire. And he glimpsed, far below the others, a struggling vertical thread of steel; his imagined tower. He felt its straining, its faltering wish to broadcast ... But from it, came only the familiar, inescapable HISS ...

He tried to stand, and fell back immediately against the hard, luminous wall of the tunnel. His sense of balance had not returned. He stepped forward, and things spun harder. He braced himself once more against the wall. How could he escape this place, when he could not even walk?

He would have to wait until the vertigo passed. But the vertigo took hours, sometimes to go away. For now, Vaughn Earl-Royal's treachery was not something he could concentrate on. There was only the nausea.

He started to slide to the floor of the tunnel.

It was then that a remarkable thing happened. Val sensed another presence in the gloom. He stepped forward (or did he, rather, begin to faint?) It didn't matter; he did not fall.

There was something solid in front of him. He opened his eyes, for he had been squinting, in an attempt to stop the spinning. He saw diamond-patterned cloth, and gold braided tassels, and colors that would have blaze if they were seen in the sunlight, rather than a subterranean maze glowing with the nearly extinguished slime of ancient slugs. He recognized the decorated fabric immediately. He saw a stylized equine neck and head to one side, and a thick tail of richly-wove yarn at the other.

It was the Rig, which had been carried, silent and unused, throughout their expedition, fastened to the side of Val Endlight's sponge. The Rig hovered now in the still air, its unoccupied gown several inches above the tunnel's floor.

As Maigraive had guessed when he first met Val, the Rig and its relationship with Val was a magical sort of affair. This was, however, a magic that Val had not experienced before. But he chose not to question the Rig's inexplicable presence here in the tunnel. He would examine that later, if he survived this wicked turn of events. He made, with some effort, the maneuvers required to strap himself into his unusual steed, and felt steadied somewhat

once he had. He sank into its mock-saddle and abandoned the concentration it took to stand on his own.

Val willed the Rig to turn and move forward, and immediately it did. The toes of Val's boots skimmed over the smooth floor of the tunnel. The tube he was in was a long one and he was fairly certain that he had entered it from the direction the Rig was now carrying him in. But circular entrances soon appeared to the right and left of him. Which of them had he and Vaughn Earl-Royal used? He had no idea. He took his best guess, and the Rig followed his every decision, carrying him along. But there was no denying that he was hopelessly lost, and moving in any one direction was just as useful (or, useless) as moving in any other. He continued on, though, making marks on the tunnel walls with his unsheathed sword so he would know if was going in circles. Weak and nauseous, he gave in to despair, as the noise in his ears grew louder.

Then the noise broke suddenly. The sudden stop of the tinnitus made him feel a huge open room had opened up in his head. Then there was a crackle, a burst of static, and the hiss was back again, but quieter.

Over the hiss, he heard a woman's voice.

“You’ve gone too far down this tunnel. Turn back, and take the first opening on the right.”

“Who is this?” Val said weakly. There was no answer.

It didn’t really matter. He knew who it was.

He willed the Rig to follow the instruction. They turned around, until they reached the next tunnel branching off from the one they were in.

“Follow it to the end.”

The Rig followed the instruction without Val consciously willing it to. At the end of that tunnel was another circular portal, and the Rig carried him into it. It twisted round and round, till finally it broke off into three new tunnels.

“Take the one to the left.”

The Rig glided abruptly to the left. They entered a narrower tunnel, glided 100 yards or so, then Val was startled when he realized that the tunnel was occupied.

“Maigraive!” he exclaimed, when he realized who it was.

“Delighted to see you, Val” Maigraive said in his low voice. “What a damned place this is!”

Maigraive looked rehydrated and good as new. “You came in here with no map?”

“A lot of good that map would have done me. All that figuring and folding! To hell with that.”

“How did you find me?”

“Never underestimate the olfactory prowess of the crocodilian snout!” Maigraive said with satisfaction, tapping his. “Although, to be honest, it only led me in your general direction. The way this place wraps around its own innards, we could be six feet away from each other and not realize it. Where’s the Ontologist?”

“He left me. Abandoned me, actually, as I was having an attack of my condition!

“I’m not too surprised. Once I came back to my own senses, I realized this whole business about you two going into the tunnels without me was fishy. The Ontologist’s not himself, Val, we were wrong to think things were right with him after we killed that sleepwalker.”

Val nodded. He was feeling a little better. The crocodilian said: “We can try to find our way out of this place, or we can try to find Vaughn Earl-Royal again.” He paused, but knew Val’s answer without his saying so aloud. “Alright then, Endlight! Let’s carry on! I can smell his

cologne, sure enough. But it's a faint scent, and I fear he's quite a ways deeper into this place ..."

"It's alright, Cassius," Val said.

"At the end of this tunnel, there are two branches. Follow the one to the left." It was the woman's voice addressing Val.

Maigraive heard nothing, but he noticed that Val seemed to be listening to something he himself could not hear.

"We go this way," Val said, stepping forward. He realized when he took the first step that he was no longer wearing the Rig. But his balance was back, and he was feeling only a little bit wobbly. The voice in Val's head continued to guide him.

The two headed deeper into the tunnels.

Val had guessed right away the source of Vaughn Earl-Royal's treachery in the tunnels: he had not been completely emptied of his demons. The demon sleepwalker Maigraive killed was not the only one that had attached itself to Vaughn Earl-Royal. Earl-Royal's abandonment of Val in the tunnels was not done through any choice of his own.

Indeed, there might have been some element of rebellion on his friend's part. For wouldn't it have been just as simple to kill Val, as to leave him alive?

Next to him, Maigraive stopped walking and said "Val, look —"

The tunnel they'd been walking through had opened up into a large, subterranean chamber. They were at the bottom of a cathedral-sized chasm. Its floor was filled with icy green water, its still surface broken here and there by imposing stalagmites and tall, weirdly shaped rocks.

In the water, and in places scattered around the dim shore of the underground lake were large, brightly decorated spheres. The balls of Pin-Uthra!

Their colors were vibrant, even in the gloom of the cavern. But, otherwise, they were exactly like the ones Val had seen in the crumbling, faded poster in Vaughn Earl-Royal's Musetoreum. The largest sphere was at least twice his own height.

"It was a big job the Ontologist planned for us, getting those to the surface, and back home. Do you really think they're light as air?"

“Maybe,” Val whispered back. “But I wonder if, having found them, he’d still have to rely on earthly means to do it.”

Val’s head had cleared. Things were no longer spinning, and his balance felt certain.

But the voice of the woman was gone. The transmission had ended.

In his head, there was just dead air, and his normal, day-to-day tinnitus.

Later, if Val survives this chapter, he will form a detailed image of what he sees just fleetingly now.

He will remember seeing, through an aperture in the rock high above him, his friend Vaughn Earl-Royal in his royal blue cape with the high collar. He will remember that, in a departure from his usual posture, the jaunty Earl-Royal is barely staying on his feet. He will remember his face as pale and drained, though this will only be a detail that his imagination embellishes the memory with, as he is much too high above Val and Maigraive in the gloomy chamber for Val to really see this.

He will remember the unsettling sight of nine phantom shapes surrounding his friend, though it is

impossible to count the number of the demons at this first sighting. He will remember that they look very much like the demon that had possessed Vaughn Earl-Royal in the desert, and like that demon, they are armed with long swords.

And finally he will remember the presence of a man he had never seen before, at least not in the flesh. A tall, gaunt figure in robes, who seems a strange combination of man, cat, and scarecrow. It is the wizard Val saw on the faded poster in Earl-Royal's Musetoreum. It was Pin-Uthra, who'd escaped Whorsnest long ago with those magic spheres they had come for.

These things will nest in Val's memory and stay there, more vividly than he sees them in actuality now. Now, he only registers the basic outline of the sighting, and his immediate understanding is that his friend is in the middle of a standoff between the wizard and the demons.

Val had freed his own sword from its sheath, and pointed the strange scene out to Maigraive. "Cassius, look! Vaughn Earl-Royal, surrounded by sleepwalkers!"

The crocodilian nodded, the yellow behind the dark pupils of his reptilian eyes glowing weirdly in the gloom.

“The Ontologist had more of those things inside him than we thought.”

Maigraive and Endlight needed to communicate no further. They charged as one to the aid of their friend.

There was a thin and steep ribbon of ascending stone leading from the low shore of the subterranean water up to the precipice where they could see the Ontologist and the demons.

Endlight and Maigraive charged for it.

The demon sleepwalkers were as surprised as Val and Maigraive to find the thousands-of-years-old wizard Pin-Uthra alive in the tunnels. Time played weird tricks in the Periphery, but none of them would have guessed Pin-Uthra could still be alive.

Pin-Uthra had thrown some sort of magic barrier around himself. It was too strong for the sleepwalking demons to penetrate. They would have gladly killed him on sight had they been able.

Val and Cassius had no magic barrier around them. When the man and the crocodile burst upon them from out of the depths, they raised their ghostly swords and flew at them.

A human and the crocodilian would be easily dealt with, compared to a wizard. The demons answered the ferocity of Val and Maigraive's attack with a ferocity of their own.

It has been asserted in this narrative that Vayle Endlight was no adventurer.

It is true that he gave a rather unimpressive account of himself, when he was attacked by the first of Vaughn Earl-Royal's demonic stowaways. The reader may also have guessed that Endlight had little love of violence. And, there was that observation about desert dwellers being pussies.

But any guess that Vayle Endlight lacked a good grasp of swordsmanship would be wrong.

He had never killed anyone. But in non-lethal competition, he was talented with a sword. (Why that was the case is for a story other than this one.)

Confronted by the phantoms in that chamber, newly emerged from his friend's unwilling sponsorship, Endlight needed no coaxing to slide his borrowed blade from its sheath and dig in. Maigraive was just as fast to attack,

adding his reckless, brawling style of swordsmanship to Endlight's more cultivated and cunning approach.

They were two against nine, at first. Then Vaughn Earl-Royal shook off the last strands of the demons' influence from his newly unoccupied body and drew his own sword. And the three of them joined together against the Whorsnestians.

Grey demon blood was spilling and spraying all over the chamber. As Val's arm and clothing became covered with it, an uncharacteristic bloodlust came over him. He swung his sword with a wild enthusiasm worthy of Maigraive.

So far from their home, the sleepwalking demons were not as deadly as they would have been in Whorsnest. Still, there were nine of them. Our heroes did not fall, but the tide of the battle started to turn against them. Pin-Uthra, meanwhile, did not back away from the battle, nor did he join in. He observed, with those strange feline eyes of his, the battle between the men, the crocodilian, and the sleepwalkers.

But, when it was five demons against Val, Vaughn and Maigraive, the ancient wizard made a move. The three were having too many close calls, and the chamber was

becoming noisy with the labored breathing. Plus, the demands of the battle and the close quarters it was being fought in did not allow for the mutilation of the fallen demons that was required to send them home to their dreaming bodies in Whorsnest; so the severed limbs and decapitated shadows, still wriggled on the floor and sought to trip and entangle the legs of Val and his companions.

At long last the wizard decided to help them. Pin-Uthra leaned back. He raised two of his arthritis-twisted fingers to his lips, and blew. A high shrieking whistle bounced off the cavern walls and rang throughout the tunnels.

None of the fighters took heed, or even noticed the sound, so caught up in the conflict were they. But those it was intended for heard the whistle, and in response to it there was a chilling rustle of feet, a ghostly, wolf-pack pattering of canine paws on hard stone.

Suddenly dogs as faded and charcoal-hued as the demonic swordsmen spilled into the chamber. They pounced, snarling, upon the fallen demons. They ripped their shadowy limbs to pieces, and flung chunks of grey flesh about them as they devoured the still-moving pieces.

The tide of the battle turned, and the remaining demons were vanquished. The dogs finished them off as Val, Vaughn Earl-Royal and Cassius Maigraive cut them down one by one.

These were the dogs, Val realized, depicted in the poster that hung in Vaughn Earl-Royal's office: gay and frolicking there, but vicious here, in their consumption of the demons.

With the sleepwalkers killed, and eaten by the ghostly dogs, old Pin-Uthra turned his attention to the newcomers. The grey dogs gathered round his feet and looked friendly again. The wizard did not.

He regarded the two men and the crocodilian with unconcealed disdain, but just a bit of icy curiosity. If Vaughn Earl-Royal and Pin-Uthra had exchanged any words before the arrival of Endlight and Maigraive, the two latecomers had no clue.

It was the wizard who broke the silence. "So after thousands of years, I lay eyes on men again." He spoke more to himself than to the three travelers. "And what do they bring me? Ten of the demons I fought so hard to

leave behind me, and a plot to steal what I have hidden from them for ages.”

Pin-Uthra looked remarkably like what the Desert Mummies had painted on their poster. He was quite tall and thin. He was thousands of years old, and he looked it. His skin was marked with deep lines and wrinkles, and there was a frailty about him that suggested his ornate robes might be the only thing holding him up.

They knew better than that, of course. It was magic that gave the wizard his bones — that lost, stygian magic which the Periphery had not known for ages.

“Great Pin-Uthra!” Vaughn Earl-Royal exclaimed, dramatically enough that both Val and Maigraive jumped a bit.

The fight had rejuvenated Earl-Royal: “It was not my intent to bring those demons to your door. They took advantage of my admiration for you, and pirated my mortal frame to lead them here. But they had no idea that you still lived. Nor did I! I can tell you of their shock, and the terror they felt, upon seeing you. I felt it too, before they left me. But now, however, as myself again, I feel only awe and delight! And a wish to help you, in whatever way I can, to

make up for the demons I unwillingly carried to your door.”

“Magicians and their stilted speech,” Maigraive muttered.

Pin-Uthra eyed Vaughn Earl-Royal bitterly. “*You* would help *me*,” Pin-Uthra scoffed. “You, who, mere minutes ago, expelled my enemies like diarrhea at my feet!”

Vaughn Earl-Royal hesitated, but was not daunted. “Yes, but their plan was foiled, sir! By my two friends here, and, if I may say so, myself, at the very end,” the Pale Ontologist stammered. “True, I was coerced by demonic possession into bringing those creatures here. But I counted on my friends here to foil the plot, and, indeed they did,” Vaughn Earl-Royal said.

“Please,” Pin-Uthra said. “You brought demons to my doorstep after a thousand years of blissful solitude.”

“My sincerest apologies, Pin-Uthra! I would do whatever I can to make up for my offense. I offer any aid I might give to correct my mistake and earn your forgiveness. My friends as well!” (Maigraive and Val exchanged a look.) “And furthermore, I offer myself as an apprentice and assistant, if you will have me.”

The Wizard scowled at Earl-Royal. “I think not.”

“Because of you — *the three* of you —” Pin-Uthra said, “I must leave what has been a serviceable residence for a thousand years. I will twist these tunnels around me as I go, and I’ll wither every portal as I pass through it, and I’ll warp the dimensions of the Periphery itself in my wake, to assure myself that the likes of you will never track me down again.”

The wizard turned away from them, and the shadowy dogs rose and turned with him. Through the aperture in the chamber wall, the three companions saw Pin-Uthra’s balls quiver and move (*nyuk nyuk*), then begin to roll in the darkness. They disappeared, presumably rolling off to meet the wizard Pin-Uthra deeper in the tunnels.

One could say that the mood of our three heroes was subdued as they returned, empty-handed, from their expedition, except for the surprising cheerfulness of Vaughn Earl-Royal.

“Imagine!” he said gaily from the top of his lurching sponge. “We met the legendary wizard, Pin-Uthra!”

“What are you so happy about, Ontologist? He certainly had no use for *you*.”

“Wizards are an ill-tempered lot,” Earl-Royal explained. “If he’d *really* disliked me, he could have disintegrated me with an eye-twitch or a lifted finger. Don't laugh, his longevity alone attests to the potency of the old magic! If the stories of Pin-Uthra are true, and not the stuff of mere legend, think of what that says about the Universe! Its promises and potentials and —”

“It’s dangers,” Val finished for him.

Earl-Royal paid no heed.

"That bit about twisting the tunnels behind him and warping dimensions in his wake, so I could never find him again ... That's was nothing short of a challenge. He wants me to look for him. That was practically an invitation!"

"If you say so," Val replied.

“And, also, what a testament to the veracity of the films of the Desert Mummies this whole affair has been! Val, did you notice how accurately the poster in my study depicted Pin-Uthra? There’s a connection between them and Pin-Uthra that goes beyond an historical appreciation. The magic spheres, the dogs ... they got it all right. It tells me their work was not based on supposition or fantasy, but real knowledge!” Maigraive had never seen the poster, but

Val couldn't dispute that they had captured Pin-Uthra, and the dogs and the magical spheres, remarkably well.

Maigraive had heard enough about the Mummers. He asked Vaughn Earl-Royal if they could be certain no more demons would pop out of him.

"Absolutely!" the latter answered. "I am an archaeologist, not a clown carriage."

"It didn't seem like that back in the tunnels," Maigraive muttered. Earl-Royal chuckled.

Endlight had been concerned that Earl-Royal would be crestfallen after his dressing-down from the wizard. But he saw that his friend was in high spirits. He'd been dazzled by this unexpected first-hand encounter with what a day before had seemed only fantasy.

Endlight, too, was feeling dazzled. A direct contact with the woman in his dreams, and the first successful broadcast from his phantom limb radio station.

Maigraive seemed content enough, but it is hard to imagine him dazzled.

Val pictured the psychic radio tower he'd erected in his mind. It was silent. He heard only the never-ending broadcast of his tinnitus. *Hisssss*. But the tower stood

perceptibly straighter than it had before. And now it was being circled by birds.

